

A Captive in the Land

As the book opens, a Dakota whose crew is engaged on a meteorological survey, is flying over the Arctic. Suddenly the wreckage of a plane and a moving human being are spotted on the ice, and Rupert Royce, the meteorologist on board, volunteers to parachute down to investigate, while the Dakota returns to base to organize a rescue expedition. He lands safely to find that there is one survivor of what proves to be a Russian plane. But, unknown to him, the Dakota crashes on its return and the whole crew is killed, so that his whereabouts are completely unknown to the outside world; all the authorities know is that his body is not among the wreckage.

So begins the extraordinary chain of events which are to lead Royce from the position of life-saver in the barren wastes of the Arctic to that of a spy in the Russian naval installations in the Crimea. As Royce's story unfolds, he becomes completely caught up in the life of the Russian pilot. This involvement comes to a head when he visits Russia ostensibly to carry out archaeological research, but also to do some quiet spying.

James Aldridge has written a book which is riveting in its atmosphere of tension and wholly convincing, whether the action is played out in the desolation of the Arctic, against the background of bureaucratic idiocy, or during the rapid interplay of love and danger in the Crimea.

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JAMES ALDRIDGE

A Captive in the Land



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A captive in the land,
A stranger and a youth,
He heard the king's command,
He saw that writing's truth.

Lord Byron
Vision of Belshazzar
HEBREW MELODIES

PART ONE

Chapter One

A Dakota of the Royal Air Force Transport Command flying over the polar ice along the 87th meridian, north of Grant Land, had sighted a strange incandescent blue stain on the sun-soaked ice. It was too far north to be an outcrop of island rock. In fact they were not very far from the pole, flying over the unusually humped-up ice cakes which were all egg-shell white, except for the grey and black streaks where the open water leads broke up the solid mass.

The pilot and the co-pilot debated through their microphones the advisability of going down to take a closer look at this odd phenomenon. They were not very high, 8,000 feet. They were flying a predetermined course along this parallel because a geophysicist in the cabin of the plane was taking magnetic readings from his set of complex instruments. That was important. The pilot did not like to upset the scientist's work which depended on a set course, exact timing and a constant altitude.

At first the pilot thought the bright blue smear on the ice was a seal colony. The co-pilot thought it possible but unlikely. They called in their other passenger, a meteorologist named Rupert Royce, because they thought he might know more about the Arctic. He was on his way home after summering at the meteorological station on Melville Island. He might know. The brilliant blue polar glare was deceiving, and they were almost too far beyond the place to see the stain at all.

'If it is a seal colony,' Royce shouted into the pilot's microphone, 'there must be hundreds of them packed together like sardines.'

It seemed unlikely, yet what else would make such a strange mark on the vast emptiness of this glaring sea of ice? The plane kept to its course because the polar sky was no place to dally in at this height. Yet it was not a shadow down there. Neither was it a patch of water, nor was it a seal colony.

'We ought to take a look at it,' the meteorologist insisted.

But the pilot had to consider the geophysicist and his instruments. The weather was not all that certain from the west. There was a particularly fierce solar storm in the atmosphere which was blotting out their short-wave radio. The pilot was also due to turn south on longitude 72 W. and head for the American base at Thule, and he did not want to be late or in any way foolish about his arrival. He always felt, landing at Thule, that he was on his mettle. That powerful and overwhelming feeling which the Americans gave off (the sheer volume of the place) was not easy to dismiss, and his estimated time of arrival was quite explicit. He did not want to frighten their radar screens by doing something odd.

'Just circle it once, Jack,' the co-pilot said, 'and that's all. But go down a little . . .'

The co-pilot was young and nimble and small-footed. The pilot was tall, bothered and large-footed, and therefore careful where he put himself. But he shrugged agreement, warned the navigator and the physicist over the intercommunication that he was changing course, and despite their loud protests and their curses took the controls off the automatic pilot and cut back the engines and mixture very slowly so that he would not have sudden trouble with them, and swung around in a 180-degree turn.

The sun swept its double layer of brilliant light across the scratched surface of the perspex. The refracted glare blinded them, a whole rainbow entered the cabin, but they saw the white fantastic snow blanket below. They had lost sight of the blue stain on the ice for a moment, but the pilot took the plane a little farther round. There it was, to the right now. The white sun blinded them again, but it was visible.

'Not seals,' Royce the meteorologist shouted in his sudden voice.

'It looks like an oil patch,' someone said.

'It's a plane,' the co-pilot shouted excitedly. 'Wreckage all over the shop. Look at it.'

'Shut up,' the pilot complained. 'Let's not shout.'

They could not help shouting. The pilot came lower. They could see what the smudge was now—not wreckage but a great oil stain spread thinly as if an oil tank had exploded with great

force. The wreckage was simply a huge yellow and red and silver streak, and bits and pieces of the plane were sticking up like dead tree stalks in the dumpy snow.

That was not all.

The pilot turned and made a run lower to take a closer look, and now two bodies were definable, small black bulky things driven awkwardly into the snow.

'They haven't been there long,' Royce shouted again. 'They're not even covered with drift.'

The pilot ignored them all, turned again and came down almost to the tips of the pressure ridges which were contorted into many cliffs of ice. He did not want to reduce speed, not trusting the intake value of this polar air, so he flew at normal cruising speed. This time they saw one man who was still strapped in his seat. He had been blown out complete, and he lay tilted against the instrument panel looking up at them, moving his face, his eyes open.

There was no doubt about it; he was barely alive but that was enough.

The pilot took the plane up again and they circled round discussing it. For at least a hundred miles all around there was nothing but pack ice either broken up by open leads or contorted into a rough and dangerous surface. A helicopter might land near here, but the nearest one was out of range, three hundred miles away on the American base at Thule. The nearest human being of any kind was at least two hundred miles away across this ice-field.

Whoever the injured man was, there would be little hope of him surviving while he waited alone for help. In which case there could be little choice before them. Royce the meteorologist, insisting that he was the most experienced, was the obvious one to go, even though he was on his way home. They went on flying around in large circles with the co-pilot at the controls while they decided quickly what they could drop with him, and how it could be done.

It took them an hour to fix up the parachute bags with all their emergency arctic supplies and their air-sea-rescue kit, which they threw overboard on separate runs.

'Everything and anything you can,' Royce said.

Even a light rubber dinghy went over, although as they watched the bundles go out they saw that only half the parachutes opened. The pilot then went back to the controls and the meteorologist put on an eiderdown vest and trousers and a canvas jacket lined with thick furleen, and over that another padded flying-suit. He carried a kitbag with the items he might require: a first-aid kit, a bubble sextant, a book of tables and a slide rule, and a map with their position on it from the navigator who had managed to get a good fix on it. In view of the failure of the other parachutes, which had been packed in damp England and had frozen in the arctic air, they had loosened the silk in his own pack and refolded it. The navigator hung it onto Royce's chest as they helped him to the door.

With full flaps on, the pilot made a slow approach and shouted into his microphone when to jump. The meteorologist jumped out of the open door and coughed painfully as the cold air plunged straight into his lungs.

The plane made one circuit to see that he had landed safely, and when Royce waved up to them from the tangled lines of the parachute, the pilot raised the flaps and the plane turned south to fly direct to the American base at Thule.

Chapter Two

Rupert Royce was not an adventuresome man, yet he was not completely overwhelmed to find himself suddenly dropped like this on to the polar ice-cap.

To some extent he had lived his life by this sort of self-inflicted surprise. He was an only son of a very wealthy family on both sides. His father was nothing to do with Rolls Royce, but he was one of a large shipbuilding, shipbrokering and stevedoring family, and his mother was a half-Scottish Stoneham. She was also wealthy enough so that wealth didn't really matter. Nevertheless, Rupert—an experimenter with life and a minor theoretician of it—had deliberately given up his share of the family money after the war because he thought that his parents had been ruined by money, that his own life had been undermined by it, and that there was no hope for a man to live securely and happily unless he worked of necessity and not for piling up money.

His father had been a generous, vain, bad-tempered, idle and friendly man, rarely seen in England between his long and fruitless voyages to the south, the west and the east, ostensibly to see their warehouse interests in Shanghai or their rubber stocks in Malaya or something else in Chile, Japan, Australia. It was partly true. These family interests were there. But his travelling to them was usually the result of a casual distaste for England, or some other lazy unfixed desire to escape, which had been so unimportant in itself that Rupert had never bothered to investigate it. His father had been lazy even in his subjective impulses, and he had died of tuberculosis in Penang, alone, under a big, damp, hot verandah weeping (the nurses wrote) because his family were not there. That was in 1936.

Rupert's mother had calmly survived him. She was now a tender and easily preserved sixty-five, and she looked barely

fifty. She had always been warm-hearted and casual with Rupert, but quite uninterested in him—not in selfish ways but with a sort of feckless delight in him. She remembered Rupert and loved him quite adequately when he was there, but she forgot and abandoned him completely when he was not there. In later life Rupert thought of her as an unchanged sixteen, with enough money to keep her that way, as if that was what money was for. He had learned as a boy to be affectionate with his mother the way she was with him—close when they were together, forgotten when they were apart. But his boyish need for affection had not been so easily satisfied as hers, and he had always been secretly disappointed in her.

The real cause of it was the money. Neither of his parents had ever done a day's work in their lives, nor had they ever imagined that they ought to. Rupert himself was almost a man before he decided, arbitrarily, that this had been the trouble with his family life—or his lack of family life. People who weren't rich always imagined that money meant ease and happiness, but money the way his family had it and used it simply meant filling in time, a whole life of it—filling up the days, and this was an occupation without reward or even (eventually) without any living interests of any sort. In making his own childhood and adolescence as best he could, he had not had this valuable clue until it was almost too late. He had almost been a victim of it himself.

The effect of this disparate existence on his development had not always been very good. As a child he had clung desperately to the edge of his mother's life in any place in Europe she had happened to be, meanwhile trying to keep his pride intact, in case she should suddenly desire to leave him somewhere. The one joy he remembered of his childhood was nothing to do with her. She had left him for a wonderful six months in the family of his Yorkshire aunt and uncle, his mother's sister: a reckless and argumentative and tightly knotted family who had taught him what family life should be. To the last day of his life the most beautiful country in the world for him would be the bare tors and riven valleys, the fells and dales of the Yorkshire moors where he had ridden the little moor ponies all day and in all weathers with his hunt-mad cousins.

At twelve he had been sent to Eton, the one positive and combined and normal and agreed family act in his life. Both parents had decreed and decided it as if this were as normal as being born, even though his French prep-school education at this point, which was all he had managed to get, was barely adequate (in English) to get him into an English public school.

Eton had given his life meaning. Already very self-sufficient and, of necessity, well-guarded in any area where his childish pride and person were concerned, he was astonished by the illogic and stupidity of the English public-school spirit and he fell foul, instantly, of its prefect—a word they never used—system. He had never been methodically bullied in his life before, although he had learned at French schools how to push, shove, kick and gouge in order to defend himself against bigger boys. The bullying itself didn't bother him, because he could look after himself; but the hierarchy of it at Eton had shocked his anarchical and rather French sense of absolute liberty. He knew within a few days that this English educational bullying, this classical and privileged preparation for later English upper-class life, was something he had to resist from the very beginning if he wanted to survive one more big extraction of sentiment from his hungry young heart.

The delicate structure of Eton, maintained as it was by the necessity to take the unusual sensibilities out of *all* its subjects, could not withstand one rebel, and one rebel could not withstand the Eton democracy. It was only a few years before him that George Orwell had been caned by boys barely his senior—at the age of eighteen, submitting to it (presumably) as a moral and enlightened necessity. But Rupert Royce, at twelve, still had the flesh and the naïve moral fibre to despise the rules and to fight back; and he had done so with purpose and strength, fed by a fairly cold streak of stubbornness which had worked both for him and against him.

His resistance had not been so unique. Most boys of spirit at that time resisted the beatings, the vulgar pyramid of authority, the climbing education of fagging, and the sound bourgeois method of imbibing plentiful doses of its own eventual disciplines for others. These things had not always gone down easily on small boys who did not really appreciate what it was for until they gave

in wearily and accepted the inevitable. Only then did they understand it. But Rupert's continued resistance and contempt for it had become irksome, so that the violence used on him had (for his own good) multiplied until it eventually reached the point when he was either going to suffer permanent physical and spiritual damage, or to give into it and accept, finally, the role he was being educated for.

It was a hard choice to make at the age of twelve, with no outside help. He would have liked to give in and to settle down to a normal life and a normal future, but the future was too deep in the past for him, and his pride would never let him go free. Because of his casual mother he could never give up his pride and feel safe, so that he had eventually made his choice without knowing it. After one particularly stupid caning, when two senior boys held his struggling body over a chair, backside up, while a third lashed him a dozen times, he had risen not chastened but so much more in revolt that he had picked up the chair and hit one of the seniors across the chest and broken his arm. That chair was what his French education in *raison* had done for him. He had escaped in the mess and run away with the twenty-five pounds he had been saving for just such an eventuality.

Rupert had never been able to convince himself since then that he had not been cowardly to flee like that. On the other hand he knew now, as firmly as he did then, that if he had not used that chair and if he had stayed within those regulated walls, his own spirit would have gone down to nothing, and he would have joined, that day, the other boys who would live the rest of their lives by the rules which his own temper had to reject in order to survive.

Sometimes now he regretted his defiance, but at the time he had remained so aggressive that he had refused again to give in to them. His mother and his Yorkshire uncle, to whose house he had fled, had sent him back; and somehow the system forgave him the chair, accepting his French background as an explanation. But this time he had realized what he was up against, and he had been more cunning and more dangerous, even infecting others, so that they had eventually given him up as ineducable, and told his mother (his father was in Valparaiso) to remove him.

He had left Eton triumphantly, sure of his victory, although

not quite knowing what the victory was. He soon knew what he had lost—quite simply the rest of his formal education. His father had been too far away to bother, and his mother had wired from Deauville accepting the English despair of his masters. She had given up, on this Eton performance, any further interest in his schooling, and as a result his struggle had become even more difficult.

Suspicious of any school, and without a firm-minded parent to correct his French libertarian nonsense, he had been able (willingly yet also unwillingly) to pick and choose his schools as he liked. He had gone to them in Paris, Cannes, Edinburgh, Dartmouth, Vevey and to the French Lycée at Athens—wherever his mother had taken him. But neither she nor anybody else had restrained him or pointed out to him that he was carrying his freedom too far. And if it ever did occur to them, they usually employed a tutor to try to shake it out of him, which only made it worse. He had been too free, and didn't know it himself, even though he did not want so much freedom.

Even so, refusal to conform at Eton had not turned him into a revolutionary or a man with harsh social theories. On the contrary, he had always admired the English bourgeoisie because they worked regularly, had good family lives, and lived for the most part by well-established values painlessly acquired. That was what he wanted . . .

The one enjoyment wealth *had* given him as a young man was the means for unlimited movement and exercise. He knew that the poorer you were the less chance you had to extend yourself. In his teens he had travelled wherever he wanted to, sailed his boat, ski-ed every winter, fished, hunted, and enjoyed the sort of physical world which only money could buy him.

But he had always felt guilty about it, because his father had done the same things in his youth, and had just gone on doing them as an adult, though in wider, richer and more elaborate forms.

So that at seventeen, when he had discovered a passionate interest in archaeology at the British school in Athens, it amounted to salvation. Yet once again his erratic background had made it difficult for him. He was then an adolescent with big demands on himself, but with very little formal education to back him up.

He never blamed his refusal to accept Eton's standards for being the real cause of it. He blamed his money once again, and realized that he would have to educate himself if he wanted to follow up this fascination in digging up the ancient world.

He was trying to do this in England when the war broke out and interrupted what looked like a long future as a gifted and rich amateur of Mediterranean culture. The Navy got him, and the war got him. In the Navy he had suffered almost the same thing as he had at Eton only this time it was different. His sense of duty, which had always been strong and fairly simple, had given it more of a purpose. Duty to one's country was easier than duty to one's class, particularly if you were inclined to suspect your own class. He had therefore enjoyed the Navy without ever accepting its standards of discipline.

But he was always bothered by the fundamental questions he could not answer. Some sort of dissatisfaction always remained in him, either with his existence or with himself or with his surroundings. The restlessness was always tempting him, and the money was always giving him too much freedom to indulge himself in searches, in movements, in change, in a disjointed and unhappy life which threatened to become permanent, like his father's.

After the war he had caught himself thinking (for lack of anything better to do) of going off to Mexico to take a look at the remains of the Aztec culture, and though it was a fairly valid desire, nevertheless he had heard a warning—the suggestive echo of his father, whose perpetual business had also been valid. Almost immediately, almost on impulse, Rupert had given up his money and through friends found a job with the Navy as a meteorologist. He could have had any one of several far better jobs, but this one fitted his practical demands, his desire to be technical and useful. This had not solved everything, but he had always felt that it solved enough. He had worked well, he had married, he now had two children, he had ceased to be permanently restless and dissatisfied—almost.

And he had almost solved the problem of what it was all about, although not quite. He had found clues, but he had never found the true explanation to life itself, and it continued to bother him. The long history of other people's failures in this direction did

not deter him. He still hoped—in some secret part of him—that he could put it all together somehow. Life was not an accident, therefore life ought to be purposeful and valuable. But he knew it was full of contradictions and surprises, and it was therefore less of a surprise to him than it would be to most men to find himself left on this ice-field in the far north to look after a half-dead Russian.

That was what this wounded man must be, on the evidence of everything around him in the wreckage.

Chapter Three

The Russian was now unconscious, and his five companions were already dead. But there would be enough shelter in the wrecked fuselage to protect this one for the time being, and Royce dragged him there—still strapped in the pilot's seat. Warmth was what he needed most and quickly. Royce gathered up some of the scattered bundles dropped from the plane and dragged them over the ice ridges into the wreckage, and he used a parachute to close the torn openings of the wrecked fuselage. There could be no fire, there was nothing at hand to burn, so he knew he must strip the Russian naked and get him into a sleeping-bag quickly.

He worked urgently but patiently, and he discovered that the Russian's legs were probably broken. They were stiff. One ear was already badly frost-bitten. 'Bad luck that,' he decided and looked at the yellow, dying, Russian face. He might live, but who could tell what his real injuries were, internally? Royce decided that he ought not to touch his broken legs, because warmth was more important to a frozen body than setting broken bones. He made sure that no snow slid into the sleeping-bag, and by taking his time (a very long and tedious business) he eased the awkward, stocky body into the small opening of the nylon bag, his bare hands stiff and clumsy with the cold.

Once he had the Russian inside the bag, he packed a floor-carpet under him and put some blankets and his leather coat over him, and then tucked every small corner of the bag around him tightly. Then he went out to hunt for the food bags and for anything else that had been dropped, before the sudden and early autumn arctic night came down like an iron blue shutter over the eastern sky.

His watch told him that he had already been five hours on the ice.

Five hours would not be long in any future he might face here.

To do things his own way had been so much a part of his upbringing that Rupert did not realize how forcefully he had decided his own course in most things; he would have been shocked if he had realized it. But now he was in a natural situation for his methods, because there was no other way to function here except in his own way. He ate, he slept the night in the other sleeping-bag, shivering, and he awoke and saw a little colour in the Russian's still-unconscious face.

Then he began to look at the sky, to listen, to wait anxiously, to light smoke signals. But today the vast arctic sky was not blue, it was low and impenetrably grey and cloudy, and the unhindered wind was blowing long thin lines of fugitive snow in downward drifts which soon became a freezing gale, and he knew it would last. He was sorry now that he had not collected more of the scattered supplies dropped from the plane, even in the darkness, because it was impossible to leave the shelter of the fuselage now.

This was serious; but something even more serious had also developed. Their particular ice-floe was cracking. It was wrenching itself apart with a thunderous noise, and their own portion of it was shifting beneath them and rocking like an ocean liner in a storm.

'We could have done without that,' Royce groaned aloud.

It was the first time he had spoken aloud to himself, and it told him how worried he was.

The moaning and surging of the wind was unnerving, and it whanged and banged on the torn pieces of fuselage which flapped and squealed noisily; and over the whistling gritty arrival of finely driven snow he felt the whole ice-pack moving, and he heard (even in the distance) the crash and the screech and the grinding of huge blocks of ice as the floes began to smash freely against each other.

The day passed and there was no sign of help arriving, and he crouched in the fuselage and wiped the drift snow off the Russian's face, and from time to time put his hand inside the sleeping-bag to be sure that it was still warm. He ate a tinfoil packet of ready-mixed vegetable soup concentrate which he opened with a Swiss pocket-knife and spooned out, solid and horrible. The Russian had moved several times, and he moved his lips which

were dry and cracked. Rupert decided that it was not much use trying to feed him, although the Russian ought to take on something, if only a little condensed milk. He had found a Russian tin of milk, but it was so frozen that it would not pour.

He needed fire, and he pulled out the kapok stuffing from a square green seat cushion, soaked it in alcohol from the medical kit, and with matches which he had discovered in the Russian's pocket, he lit a small smoky flame which gave off a rank odour which swept and whirled around them as the wind caught the parachute curtain and blew it flapping inside. But he sheltered the fire and held the milk over it and burned it long enough to make the milk run.

'That's stupid of me.'

Royce had burned his fingers on the outside of the tin which was too hot to hold. But his hands were frozen by now and he was shivering with the concentration of what he had been doing. He waited until he had restored his circulation before he lifted the Russian's head a little and tried to pour some of the warmed milk into him.

'Swallow it!' he shouted at the Russian above the gale.

He squeezed the Russian's bristling and sagging cheeks and poured the milk again, careful not to make a mess of it. He could see the yellow milk in the Russian's mouth; and more by a sudden impulse than anything else he blew a sharp breath into the Russian's closed eyes, and the sensitive reaction was a miraculous if unconscious swallow.

'You'll be all right,' Royce said aloud.

But he was not greatly concerned at the moment for the Russian's life, because he knew that the problem would be to preserve his own. No plane could venture out in this weather, and in any case, if this cracking of the floes reached their particular spot and split their floe in half, it was possible that it would tip up and sink them for ever into the Arctic Ocean.

The next day it was still pointless and even dangerous to venture far outside. The wind was now blowing a blinding drift at more than fifty knots, so he began to inspect the littered and torn fuselage of the plane to see what he had to survive with.

It was a tangle of instruments and wires and broken girders and seats. He stuffed anything he could into the broken windows —maps, padded curtains and green cushions. Why did Russian polar planes have so many green cushions? He found the radio-operator or the navigator dead and jammed stiffly into a corner, his lap sadly filled with code books and rulers and a bubble sextant which had fallen in on him, his eyes wide open. He dragged him out in the blizzard and spent a difficult hour burying him in a drift with his companions. Cameras, scientific instruments and personal clothing and even suitcases were scattered about inside the fuselage. Axes, rifles and snow shovels and a long stainless steel ice spike with a wooden handle were still firmly clamped to one wall. Fire extinguishers were intact. Green boxes of unknown contents were intact. In the broken tail pieces of the plane, which he had to enter by leaving the main body, there was a pile of what was obviously emergency polar equipment—plastic drums, clothing, sleeping-bags, tents, and even an aluminium folding bed which had burst open.

He wondered about fuel. It was going to be absolutely vital, if they were hoping to eat the English concentrates which needed hot water. Paraffin was therefore essential. He began smelling the plastic drums, but they did not smell of paraffin. He knew there must be a paraffin stove or a primus in their emergency equipment somewhere, and he began to burrow into it; but there was obviously no fuel there at all.

He went back to the main fuselage and broke into one of the boxes which contained silver packages with Russian names on them. Knowing Greek he could read Russian enough to realize that they were food and vitamin concentrates, but he took the wooden lid and lit another small fire of the kapok and wood and heated more milk and put some of the Russian blackcurrant concentrate into it and poured it into the Russian's mouth again.

This time the Russian opened his eyes a little and nodded.

The blizzard lasted three days, and he spent most of the time feeding the semi-conscious Russian. Then the wind calmed, shifted south, and an arctic fog lay over the white pack, so close that the air looked like floating white water, heavily suspended.

He listened continuously. He lit smoke fires again. Twice he thought he heard aircraft, but who could be sure?

'I'm sunk now,' he told himself. 'They'll never be able to find us.'

There was no sign of a clear sky for six more days. The big floes were still breaking up with Olympian explosions, and they were obviously drifting; but the day had shortened so quickly that already the blue sunlight of noon was merging imperceptibly at both ends with the late dawn and a very early dusk. It was almost the arctic winter.

Royce had, by now, given up looking hopefully at the closed sky, and when he wasn't feeding the Russian he was urgently gathering every article of any shape he could find in the wreckage and in the bags of parachuted supplies, which he looked for in the ice-hummocks. He found very little of it. He did find two small boxes of complex powders, which was a new emergency ration for light travelling, and he decided to hoard them. He found the Russian paraffin stove and the drums of paraffin. He searched and organized, and the days passed so quickly that he hardly remembered them. There was hardly a moment when he was not struggling desperately against time, and he fell asleep every lengthening night with a feeling that he was being reckless to sleep at all.

Finally the late October sun appeared briefly for the last time. He would not see it again for four months, if he managed to survive that long. No plane would appear now, and all he could hope to do was hang on somehow through the long dark winter on the ice-floe, keeping the Russian alive if he could, and hoping for discovery and rescue when the arctic darkness had passed in the spring to come.

On the whole it seemed fairly hopeless. It was already, in the space of a few days, an animal-like existence. Yet when he was most depressed about it, the Russian (who had been half-conscious but incoherent) suddenly came to his senses and spoke a few words in Russian, then a phrase or two in halting English. Was Royce American?

Royce smiled happily, feeling relieved and pleased. At least he would have a companion who could talk . . .

The Russian said he was Alexei Alexeivitch Vodopyanov, a

pilot. He shook the Englishman's hand weakly and thanked him again and again for coming.

'I thought I was dreaming because I was dying. I thought I had dreamed of parachutes coming down. How could I believe it?'

There were tears in the Russian's eyes, but he did not understand his real predicament yet. He was simply glad enough, for the moment, that he was part safe, part saved, part alive.

Chapter Four

In those first few weeks, when his mind was still worried about their future, Rupert could study this Russian with a fairly deliberate interest: anything, in fact, to avoid thinking of their predicament.

He had never met a red Russian before, so that even a man as helpless as Vodopyanov had to be looked at as the first sample of his race. In general, Russia was a dark country to Rupert. He disliked communism because he felt that it incarcerated the spirit and denied freedom to the individual; that was obvious. The combination of a feudal and erratic and peasant country with a modern ideology of force and missionary insistence meant, on the whole, a dangerous influence in the world, which he felt had to be faced firmly and continuously.

He couldn't say he didn't like the Russians as people because he had never had any experience of them. But Vodopyanov (he supposed) was a peasant who must be fairly typical. Why he thought of Vodopyanov as a peasant he didn't know, except that he was very dark-haired, stocky, and had the simple and open and energetic face of almost any peasantry except the northern French and the Germans. Rupert knew the French very well, so he felt equipped to understand the Russian character, because the French too had this acute overlapping of earth and brains. The Russians could never have the sophisticated spirit of the French, but their intelligent egotistical character was probably the same, as the world situation seemed to suggest.

So he looked at Vodopyanov already as an earthy fellow yet an able man, certainly rather self-centred, a slightly clumsy or inept man, a secretive man, and perhaps even a dangerous one—although it was hardly fair to put that onto Vodopyanov, sweating feverishly and painfully on his back in this small dark cell, and keeping his spirits up with a hearty sense of Russian humour.

‘He must be terribly tough,’ Rupert decided, aware that he would have to be very tough himself as their situation worsened.

The Arctic had already closed in on them completely. The sky was almost permanently dark and sometimes sick with a few hours of faint noon or pale moonlight, until even the moon waned and finally disappeared. The aurora then burned the sky with curtains of dripping, running, flowing lights, but they seemed worse than the darkness. He hated the aurora.

But a few weeks of this sort of arctic enclosure had already arranged their lives for them, as if the whole thing had been planned: ‘Put Royce and Vodopyanov down there on meridian 87, and let them work it out for themselves—if they can.’

They were working it out fairly well so far, and though the paralysed Russian was sufficiently aware now to suggest that the Englishman go off and leave him (take what food he could and try to reach some kind of life two hundred miles away), Royce went on concentrating on providing food, keeping warm, and dodging these occasional excursions into their real danger.

‘Better not talk about it,’ Royce said to Vodopyanov when he repeated this suggestion that Rupert go off on his own. ‘Forget the whole idea!'

‘Why forget it?’ Vodopyanov said good-naturedly. ‘Better to know what it means, Rupert. Better not to stay here and worry about me. I’ll be all right.’

‘I’m not worried about you,’ Rupert said sharply.

‘Good!’ the Russian said. ‘Then you ought to leave me.’

Vodopyanov would always come back again and again to this suggestion that Rupert should take some food and go, always on the thin assumption that maybe he could bring back help.

‘That’s impossible!’ Rupert said angrily. ‘In fact it’s a childish suggestion . . .’

Vodopyanov laughed rather sadly and said that Rupert sounded like his wife. ‘That’s what she says when she doesn’t like my suggestions. *Don’t be childish!* But after a little while she always agrees with me.’

Alexei was playing his hearty role out, and he told Rupert that like most students in Russia he had studied English for five years and that he had learned his slight American pronunciation while

stationed at Rudolph Island listening to the American Forces Network radio station in Germany.

‘A.F.N.,’ he said in a snarling and faint imitation of an American voice. ‘The Amurican Furces Netwuk in Jummeny!’ Alexei would laugh uproariously, even lying helplessly and painfully on his back. ‘Those Americans!’ he would say.

That would surely beat it. He would simply go on laughing it off. He loved to say: ‘Ah well, Rupert. A few more months and the sun will come back again. My legs will be better, then off we’ll go, eh?’

But often he would groan in agony afterwards and fall silent and spend days drifting with his pain and moaning sometimes to himself or into his sleeping-bag or into his hands. He could not even sit up.

Royce listened and could do nothing. He was not being humourless when he didn’t respond, he simply believed that it was better to calm Vodopyanov rather than extend the hearty humour. There was very little use in them getting too forcefully gay in their predicament. And anyway, there were also so many other demands in this strange life that he had to ignore Vodopyanov when he was suffering most.

‘How are your legs?’ he asked the Russian.

‘I have no more legs,’ Vodopyanov replied with a helpless shrug. ‘I can’t feel anything from the waist down. Nothing at all, Rupert. I am useless to you . . .’

‘Don’t worry,’ Rupert told him. ‘You’ll be all right.’

Vodopyanov laughed sadly then. ‘That’s also what my wife would say. I crashed my plane once. I broke my two arms and one foot, and she looked at me in the hospital when she thought I was dying and said over and over, “You’ll be all right, Alexei. Don’t worry, Alexei!”’ Vodopyanov laughed again.

‘Not much else I can say,’ Rupert said, slightly irritated.

‘I know! I know! Don’t worry about me,’ Vodopyanov said. ‘Say what you like. I don’t mind. I’m joking, Rupert. We’ll both be all right. You are like that famous gentleman, Captain Robert Scott, a very famous gentleman.’

‘Never mind that,’ Rupert said, startled that the Russian should have heard of Scott but disliking the hint of a similar fate in store for them. ‘What I’ve got to do, Alexei, is to learn to hunt

in the dark. Do you know anything about arctic winter hunting?"

"Everything," Alexei said. "It's almost impossible to hunt here in winter."

"There should be bear and seal on the ice, if only I can see them."

But by this time Alexei was so exhausted that he lay back in the sleeping-bag on the reconstructed folding bed which Royce had found in the Russian plane. He was obviously undermined by his own helplessness in the face of the darkness, the deepening and unquenchable cold, the thin sounds of whining emptiness, and the increasing bulk and clumsiness of their everyday life.

Rupert's routine inside was set and very full. He had carefully divided up their English and Russian supply of food concentrates into daily portions—enough for four months. He kept the English complex powders for an emergency or for an eventual journey over the ice. And he had organized the business of cooking and getting the paraffin from the drums and lighting the lights and using the little stove and keeping the place free of the cracks of draughts and winds, getting water from snow, and filling up the little snow tunnel he had made into the entrance with loose drift to keep out most of the snow and at the same time to keep them supplied with snow for the water they boiled all day.

"It's getting too cold," he complained to Vodopyanov.

It frightened him every time he went outside into this blue and white night, surrounded by such a white waste, limited only by curtains of crazily fluid colours flaring up high in dead, incredible silence, as if darkness itself were deaf and could not hear the movement of these violent rainbows. He hated them. He felt as if he were trying to exist in the muffled depths of the ocean, struggling to come to the surface which would take weeks, months—and perhaps he would fail to reach the top at all. Inside, it was close and dim and concentrated; outside it was empty and white and blue and dead.

But one fear could replace another.

His fear of becoming lost was stronger than any other. He had a poor sense of arctic direction because there were no landmarks except ice-hummocks, and he stumbled over them and fell and froze his bare hands which became wet and uncomfortable when he pushed them into his blouse to warm up.

'I'll have to take the light,' he told Vodopyanov when he came back.

He was going to try hunting again, and he decided to hang the hurricane lamp on a small metal fragment he had buried into the snow on top of the fuselage. He carried the Russian rifle slung across his chest so that if he slipped into an unseen and wet crevice or a snow bridge he wou'd not lose it—even if he lost himself in some hole in the ocean.

'There are bears where there are seals,' Vodopyanov shouted as he left. 'Bears smell. They don't make noise. Be careful! Seals in winter make breathing holes so small that you need dogs to smell for them. Don't look for seals, Rupert . . .'

Vodopyanov knew the Arctic well: Rupert himself knew about Stefansson's theory (revolutionary in its day) that a man could live indefinitely off the polar ice with a rifle. Stefansson had done it for more than a year. Nansen had made his fifteen months' trek across the northern ice with no more than a rifle to feed him. It was therefore possible, except that both these skilled explorers had managed to hunt enough meat in the summer to last them through the winter when there was no real hunting.

But in their case winter hunting might be vital, because their store of those little tins and silver packages of English and Russian emergency rations was not going to be enough. Also, Royce had to admit that he knew little about arctic hunting. Who could see seals in darkness, even when they put their noses out of their tiny ice holes? Impossible! Even without Alexei's advice he had decided to hunt bear because one bear would be two weeks' more meat, two weeks to store up against the day when their rations ran out as they probably would in the early spring.

'Don't lose the rifle,' Vodopyanov called after him as he walked away.

That was one of Vodopyanov's encouraging jokes.

But Vodopyanov had watched him go as if he might not come back. When Rupert had closed the parachute flap of the entrance tunnel, the Russian lay back in the darkness in the double sleeping-bag and began a series of painful exercises, sweating and punishing himself until he felt that his body muscles must either tear to shreds or begin to work. What was the matter with his body? He *must* learn to sit up, he *must* learn to unfold his broken

and paralysed back, he must learn to drag himself out of the sleeping-bag, because he could not go on with this unpleasant need to be cleaned up like a baby. It was shameful for him and it was hard on this careful, patient Englishman.

Vodopyanov bent upwards from the waist, his eyes bulging and his neck swelling. Cold sweat and tears streaked down his cheeks as he tried to force his back muscles to respond, his hips to support him. If only he could reach his legs . . .

But he could not even sit up, and when he managed to get up as far as his elbows could lever him, and when he had made a final effort to get right up, he fell back heavily, fainting for a few minutes with the kind of pain which had no beginning and as yet no foreseeable end.

*

Survival under these conditions was only momentary, and would continue to be a miracle. No one would find them now in the winter. A polar storm could blow them away. Who would find them even in the summer, if the floe moved fast enough with pack ice to enter the Atlantic? The floe might even turn north and freeze into the pole itself. Yet even these threats did not matter to them all the time.

Darkness, filth, cold and a limited supply of food were the great reducers of anything larger that could frighten them. In the now frequent blizzards they froze, even though the paraffin stove kept the inside temperature at freezing point. They were hoarding food and did not eat enough to keep themselves warm, and they talked about food far too often. The aluminium walls of the fuselage condensed moisture and dripped home-made snowflakes and rain on their bedding after every complicated effort at cooking. Their ablutions were crude, their faces were black with their filthy beards. The dirt itself seemed to distil from the purest air to become grime and grease, saturating their clothes and bodies; and they now talked too much about bathing.

Rupert stumbled about outside as often as he could (always within sight of the lantern), looking for a large white shape to kill. Sometimes he would also hunt for the rest of the rations they had parachuted from the plane. Then for days he had to stay inside the fuselage because of the weather outside. He lay in his sleeping-bag and began—for the pressure it put on Vodopyanov to feel

useful and because he hated his own ignorance—to learn Russian.

‘Give me the alphabet first,’ Royce told him through chattering teeth. ‘Not so much how to read it, Alexei, but how to write it. All grammar books ought to be written in handwriting. I learned Latin at school but I taught myself Greek, and though I can read it in print well enough, I still have trouble with the handwritten script.’

‘What else did you teach yourself?’ Vodopyanov asked, to make a joke of it.

‘Most of anything I know,’ Rupert said.

He felt that he could afford to indulge in a little self-pity, even though it wasn’t true. French schools had given him a sound knowledge of, and affection for, French culture, his English schools had taught him to think for himself and to enjoy the fun of being young, and his Swiss schools had given him a solid lesson in patience and dogged application. Even the Navy had taught him how to make decisions, and how to take a chance. He had always taken chances in the Navy, and this had earned him a certain amount of dislike from the lower deck of his MTB. The lower deck never trusted the wild men of the upper deck. None the less, he had been liked and trusted by most men, even though he was considered an off-centre eccentric. But even that was tolerated: didn’t his kind of family and his sort of wealth usually produce his sort of half-crazy Englishman?

He tried to tell Vodopyanov some of his background, but even in these conditions he could not give it any true meaning. A man lived two lives—the one outside him and the one inside him—and the only point in telling what one’s life was like, was to tell what it really meant. The outside part hardly mattered.

So he preferred to listen to Alexei, who told Rupert about his boyhood near Tula, tending geese, and getting into trouble. He had run away to be a hero, simply because he had been born with the same name as another famous Russian arctic pilot—Mikhail Vassilivitch Vodopyanov.

‘That’s why I became a pilot,’ Alexei told Rupert happily. ‘Same name! What a man Mikhail Vassilivitch was. He and Gromoz and Danilan and Chkalov and Golvin were like gods to us boys. Even to have the same name. I was so lucky!'

Vodopyanov sighed with a thousand unspoken recollections.

Rupert listened to him now as he tried to explain the real key to the Russian language, because he said there was always a key to a language—or to anything for that matter.

'You must remember first of all,' Vodopyanov said firmly, 'that everything in Russian has a gender. And there is no *the*. We never point out a word or a thing. Not the way you do in English—*the man, the world*. Why do you do that? In Russian everything suddenly appears! *Man! World!*'

Vodopyanov suddenly laughed at this beautiful Russian artistry.

But every time Vodopyanov laughed like that now, Rupert looked at him secretly and suspiciously, because he felt the threat in it. He knew that Vodopyanov was always contemplating a very noble gesture in order to give Rupert himself a better chance of surviving. Vodopyanov looked like that kind of a man. It was too often burning in his eye, as if there was always something waiting, something really worth while making a sacrifice for. It was always there when he laughed heartily. That was also when Rupert saw the pain. But it was not there, strangely, when he was quiet and calm and sometimes unhappy. Rupert did not believe in gestures; he was convinced that he hated them; and it would simply be an embarrassment to him now if the Russian tried to sacrifice himself like that.

'You're a bit like the Italians,' he said once to Vodopyanov rather sourly.

Alexei stared in amazement, and laughed again. What a joke!

Rupert felt foolish and decided he was wrong. Maybe this fear of drama in their confinement was exaggerating his outlook, and he tried thereafter to concentrate on the skeleton routine and not to think about their situation at all.

His routine was insatiable anyway, and always demanding something extra from him. He fixed a leaking paraffin drum, he shortened the open length of the fuselage by filling the end with snow thus making their quarters smaller and easier to keep dry; he lined the inside of the fuselage with parachute nylon to increase warmth and prevent condensation; he tried to devise new means of ventilation to prevent any quick and easy death by carbon monoxide poisoning from the lamp or the stove; and he began to construct a sled from the ribs and remnants of the

wreckage so that if the ice cracked under them they might have a chance to get away to another floe.

He tried to work deliberately, he tried to live deliberately, he tried to learn Russian deliberately (and he succeeded in the Russian at least because he had an ear for languages) and he treated Vodopyanov very deliberately. He also tried to feed Vodopyanov more than he took himself, but Alexei found him out and objected angrily.

'That's not a good idea, Rupert. It's bad luck. You must think correctly. If you get weak, I will not be able to help you or help myself. *That* is correct thinking. You should eat more than I do because you are active and I'm not.'

'Some day,' Royce decided, 'I must correct that phrase of his about things being good luck or bad luck.'

He didn't bother now, but he did insist that Vodopyanov eat the valuable higher-calory food like chocolate and the less bulky food too, because functionally the Russian was now a baby. Though Vodopyanov had laboriously slit the edge of his own sleeping-bag and though he could move his buttocks off the edge of the bed over a prepared snow pile, Vodopyanov came nearest to depair when the natural function still made such a mess in their confined quarters that it created a miserable task for Royce to clean up.

Rupert also had to massage Alexei's legs to try to maintain some circulation in them, because it was clear now that it was not his legs that were broken but probably his back which was paralysed. It was certain that Vodopyanov would never be able to walk away from this place on his own legs.

Vodopyanov tried again to make Rupert face this. 'When the spring comes, you must leave,' he told Rupert, 'because I will never be able to move from here.'

'I'll drag you,' Rupert said offhandedly.

'Impossible! How could you drag me? How? Where to?'

'We'll work that out,' Rupert said.

It was clear already that this would be their only hope, but Rupert was not yet ready to face the idea himself, and he tried to forget it. Soon, they both had to forget it, because winter was at its worst, and slowly they both went down to their lowest ebb. Often, now, they would both sleep heavily for twenty-four hours,

or they would spend days in a cold stupor and simply eat their food like animals, hardly acknowledging each other at all except with a word; sometimes a grunt. Afterwards, they would subside again into their heavy dejection.

They felt comparatively safe in this torpor until the morning when Vodopyanov had a serious relapse, becoming feverish and refusing to eat. Royce got up and muttered angrily to himself, as he boiled a mash of porridge and glucose: 'This bloody Russian is trying to die, I'm sure of it.'

The relapse had come after a particularly bad week of blizzard. At midnight of the sixth day of it, the wind had blown so hard that the fuselage suddenly shifted. Rupert woke up as it began to heave, and Vodopyanov shouted, 'Look out, Rupert. We're moving . . .'

Another gust caught them and lifted the whole fuselage. It tipped sideways and fell back, and the sudden wrench opened up the tunnel entrance, exposing new holes to the wind and the snow. The lamp went out and the fuselage was instantly filled with the blizzard. Snow poured in on them.

Rupert leapt out of the bag and began to grope about blindly trying to stuff up the holes again. But the wind was so powerful that he lost as much as he gained. He had to stumble outside and lie flat in the wind for a long time, trying to pack the snow into the lee-side holes. Then he crawled back inside and tried to fight the surge of air and ice in the darkness. He could not stop it. His face and mittenred fingers were already frost-bitten, and his eyes were so painful that he had to keep them wide open, because his eyelids were also touched. He worked for two hours, three hours—it seemed a longer time than that—but eventually he had the holes stuffed, the tunnel remade, the wind locked out.

It was a close business, and when Rupert managed to light the lamp again he saw that Vodopyanov in his bag was under feet of snow, too weak to sweep it away. Rupert dug him out, and Alexei lost his temper for a moment and shouted out something in agonized Russian, which Royce guessed was a suicidal suggestion.

'Don't start now!' Rupert snapped tiredly at him.

But Vodopyanov lay still, too exhausted to go on with it. Rupert got the stove alight and pushed the loose snow out into the tunnel, and he waited until it was comparatively warm again before he fell into his bag, exhausted and shivering. The fuselage was still in disorder, but after eight hours of struggle Rupert was too battered to go on, and he knew he must sleep.

He felt those Russian eyes watching him.

‘Go to sleep!’ Vodopyanov shouted above the gale. ‘It can’t last much longer.’

Royce was too tired to care, and he slept. But when he awoke he was instantly alert to see if Vodopyanov had done anything murderous to himself. Vodopyanov was all right, he was still there; but already it was clear that he was feverish. He had fallen into a heavy and restless sleep. He shouted and moaned, and Royce was sure that it was his self-sacrificing mind telling his stubborn body to give up and die.

‘You’re only going to make it worse,’ Royce groaned aloud to him.

He got up and began wiping Vodopyanov’s thin and feverish face with snow. Fever had to be reduced, he decided. He soaked some kapok in alcohol and used it on Vodopyanov’s face like an engineer using a piece of cotton-waste on a machine. But Vodopyanov’s beard soaked up dirty sweat quicker than the kapok, and Rupert had to wipe hard to make any effect, so that Vodopyanov’s eyes were soon open and watching him.

‘You’ve been sweating,’ Royce explained, ‘but you’re okay.’

Vodopyanov nodded, shivering violently.

‘Are you still cold?’ Royce asked gently.

Vodopyanov shook his wet head, watching the Englishman carefully.

‘I’ve cooked you some hot mash, and you’d better eat it somehow.’

‘Not yet,’ Vodopyanov said weakly.

‘You ought to, you know.’

‘Don’t worry. I am all right,’ Vodopyanov said faintly. ‘Your face looks very bad . . .’

‘It’s frost-bite. It doesn’t do much harm,’ Royce said, which was true.

He was more concerned with the raw sores which were develop-

ing inside his legs. His dirty trousers were so bulky in their padding that he rubbed the skin off his legs every time he moved. Now they were bleeding, and he was afraid of infection. He had put a padding of penicillin ointment on them, but it had melted and was running down his legs into his big boots, which he had wrapped around with one of the quilted partitions he had found in the fuselage. He looked like a baby elephant now.

‘I’m still bad luck,’ Vodopyanov said sadly and tiredly to him. ‘Not so?’

Royce shrugged dispassionately and saw that Vodopyanov was too exhausted to be talking. He was breathing deeply and his eyes were closing and his whole face was sunken in again. Even to move his head seemed to be too much of a dangerous effort, and Royce sat on the floor to talk to him.

‘Not much use giving up now, Alexei,’ he said encouragingly to the Russian. ‘It’s only a matter of time—a couple of months perhaps. All we have to do is accumulate a little food, which I can do in the spring when I’ll be able to see far enough to hunt seals. Then we can set off across the ice before it breaks up.’

‘You think so?’ the Russian said faintly and then shook his head. ‘I don’t think so, Rupert.’

‘Even if you can’t walk,’ Rupert went on, ‘I can pull you on the sled I’m building. This ice must be drifting east, perhaps even south-east, so we might be getting nearer Greenland or Peary-land all the time. Don’t let it get the better of us now.’

If Vodopyanov heard it above the wind he did not say anything. It was too unbelievable anyway, no matter how genuinely Royce meant it. The Russian’s eyes were open but he did not show any emotion when Royce wiped his hot face with the kapok. Suddenly it was strangely quiet, as if the world had suddenly stopped and was standing quite still. Royce lifted his head in alarm to listen . . .

Then the wind hit the fuselage so hard with a new gust that the whole interior shook and the fuselage shifted again.

‘The paraffin . . .’ Vodopyanov shouted.

The paraffin drum had been given enough momentum to fall flat and roll heavily on Royce who was squatting near Vodopyanov. He was pushed against Vodopyanov who was knocked out of his bed.

The snow rushed inside again as if some frantic cyclops were

trying to smother them in their cave. The drum rolled back. Royce struggled to set it up. The snow tunnel leading to the fuselage had opened up again, and what was left of the parachute curtain at the doorway was ripped to shreds in a single crack. The hurricane lamp blew out and banged on to the fuselage, and one concentrated gust almost lifted the whole fuselage up. It rocked, then righted itself.

Again Royce became desperately, wearily active.

He did not have his thick jacket on, but he stumbled outside with the snow shovel to fill the gap in the entrance tunnel, but as fast as he shovelled the driving granular snow in the driven darkness, the crazy wind blew it all away in a huge joke. He could not stand up in the wind anyway, so he abandoned the shovel and got down on his hands and knees, scooping up the flimsy, reckless, flying drift with his arms and body and pushing and embracing and packing it into position, protecting it under his body so that the wind could not tear it away.

He was instantly soaking wet as his body melted little corners of snow which poured into his clothes, driven into him by the wind. Only his violent efforts kept his body warm enough to go on. But he soon began to shiver, not in small shivers but whole convulsions.

A minute could count now. The body could only withstand so much of this before it lost more temperature than it could possibly recover.

But first he relit the lantern and then the stove and then he tore off his stiff clothes layer after layer with his bleeding hands which were so numb that he could not feel them, and at last he pushed himself into his sleeping-bag.

‘Rupert!’ Vodopyanov called. ‘You must move . . .’

Royce could not answer, afraid to open his chattering teeth.

‘You must get out, and get into my clothes and move. *Do it please. Please!*’

Royce thought the suggestion too stupid, not even worth trying to reply to. If he got out of his sleeping-bag now to get into Vodopyanov’s heavy drawers and leather trousers he would never make it.

‘I’m all right,’ he said, but his tongue could not brace his teeth to make it a coherent sound.

But he did move. He began to shift about on the fuselage floor by bouncing himself about in the sleeping-bag.

'That's right,' Vodopyanov encouraged weakly from his prone position. 'Jump like that. Jump! Jump!' He nodded his head excitedly up and down in time to Royce's bouncing journey back and forth across the few open feet of space between them.

It was too tiring, and Royce knew that it would be worse than ever if he became exhausted; so he lay still and decided to force himself to sleep again.

He pulled in his face and deliberately relaxed, he loosened his tightened body and allowed it to shake recklessly, he forced his fists open, his sore eyes to close, his muscles to untense. Surely this would give his body a chance. But the wind still buffeted the fuselage crazily, and he tensed his body with every gust. If the same upheaval of the fuselage happened again he would never be able to get out and cope with it. And he was still worried about Vodopyanov. He had left Alexei lying on the floor in his sleeping-bag.

Then quite suddenly he slept, and almost immediately he dreamed that he was in an English train pulled by an engine which filled the compartment with smoke, blotting out his whole family who were sitting with him in the first-class carriage—his wife Joanna, his six-year-old daughter Tess, and his ten-year-old son Rolland in a grey English schoolboy's flannel suit with long trousers—the sort of clothes his wife always insisted on him wearing.

Chapter Five

His wife, Joanna, probably considered him dead by now. But whatever she thought she would be having a terrible time.

She was a woman of very quick ideas, and she would decide unhappily but impulsively one day that he was dead. She lived in the present, and she would not allow herself to believe he was alive until he proved it himself, in the living flesh.

And the children?

'No, no!' he instructed her sadly, dazed, half-awake, and thinking of them. 'Don't do it, Jo. Don't tell them until you're absolutely sure.'

Jo's life-and-death honesty was not such a good thing when it came so quickly, when it was quicker than her sensitivity and her natural affection. Forthrightness itself had been all right when she was younger, but what she needed at thirty-seven was a little more care and balance. 'Honesty ought not to become a sort of punishment. . . .' Even so, weren't the children in their frankness and intelligence a satisfying reflection of *her* honesty and her character?

But he was upset to find himself (even out here) justifying his own theories on behaviour and correcting hers, going back over old and worn-out and stubborn disagreements between them. She had always been too impulsive . . .

'Oh, cut it out!' he groaned to himself.

It was dangerous to think of them, because it became depressing, hopeless, and frightening. 'Don't think about them, and you'll be all right,' he told himself. He was superstitious. But every day now, they kept on forcing themselves into his imagination so persistently that it became painful and maddening. It needed discipline to remove them, and he would almost shout out aloud: 'Go away! Please go away!' when the simple recollection of each one—of Jo herself in a healthy and slightly irritating

and yet completely flushed and womanly way—would stir his heart out of its flimsy discipline, and when the children fluttered into him on the wings of sentiment, in that helpless perfection of all absent children which their faces and figures and clothes and their frankness and complete trust made of them.

Why hadn't he considered them in the first place? What was he doing out here with a helpless Russian on a frozen polar ice-cap? Where was the sense to it?

'Go away,' he cried once more to his heart.

Nothing and nobody went away from him, and he became miserable for a moment with the thought that his own survival depended on never allowing himself any tantalizing hopes of seeing them again. That would undo him too much.

'I must be getting maudlin,' he decided and opened his eyes, which allowed all the sores on his legs to start burning him, his hands to feel raw, his scabbed eyelids to stick painfully, and his hunger and weariness to present their stored-up debit against him.

'Ah—Rupert!' Vodopyanov said. 'Are you better now? The lamp has gone out. I tried to reach it but I couldn't do it.'

The darkness hurt this time, but he was glad of Vodopyanov's irrepressible voice. He sounded marvellously there.

'That's all right,' Rupert said to him. 'I'll get up now. How long have I been asleep?'

'Fourteen hours,' Vodopyanov said, looking at his luminous wrist-watch. 'I think it is morning.'

This was another problem of the perpetual winter darkness: knowing whether it was eight o'clock morning or eight o'clock evening. They had lost count of at least twelve hours in the early days of darkness, and now they argued about it sometimes. Was it ten o'clock morning now, or ten o'clock night?

'Morning,' Vodopyanov insisted. 'And today is also the day of the solstice. The sun is right over the south pole. I have two good Russian friends there on Mirny. They must think I'm dead. They're probably thinking of me now: *poor Vodopyanov!* But today, Rupert, the sun begins to turn up towards *us*. Oh yes . . .'

That was true. Today the sun would begin its long journey northwards, and perhaps in a month's time a few pale streaks of light might appear on the eastern sky, then one day the sun itself would show a bar of light on the horizon.

‘Are you all right?’ Vodopyanov was asking again.

‘I’ll just lie here for a little while,’ Rupert said very slowly, ‘and then I’ll get up. But don’t let me go to sleep again, Alexei. Just a little while and then I’ll get up.’

But Alexei looked at him doubtfully as he fell into a heavy, unnatural sleep.

Chapter Six

It was true that Jo had been having a terribly difficult time. So far she was not going to believe that Rupert was dead; but it was a numbed occupation trying to find out what had happened to him. His countless friends would not believe he was dead either, and the Air Ministry always replied that it was a bit of a puzzle to them what had happened. Phillips-Jones, the head of Rupert's own section, had told her that when the Dakota he was in had crashed in landing at Thule, there was plenty of evidence of everybody else being dead, but no sign at all of Rupert in the wreckage. Nobody (Phillips-Jones told her incredulously) knew where he had gone to, or what had happened to him. In any case there was little or no chance of him being alive, wherever he was.

She knew Rupert's friends in the Ministries and there was an uncle in Parliament, but they could find out nothing more, no matter how much she argued and fought. She had also called her own cousin and asked him about the Admiralty; weren't they responsible also, wasn't everyone responsible? But the mystery remained, and now she was fretting impatiently, waiting for a Wing-Commander Moore who said he had news. He was coming out to see her in the Hampstead house which she had saved from Rupert's reckless disposal of everything he had owned after the war.

'Only the rich,' she had remarked bitterly to Rupert whenever they argued over money or love, 'could afford to be as eccentric as you were when I married you.'

Rupert had always strongly denied eccentricity, and he would get angry with Jo only when she dragged in his money as a way of attacking him, although he knew that she considered everything fair material to attack him with when she was in a bad temper. Usually he didn't mind her outbursts at all, but the money attack always hurt and stung him into an occasional hot reply. Five

minutes later she would forget that she had even made any comments like that anyway, but he would always remember them.

It was true though about money. It was also partly true about his eccentricity, although he hated that too. He would argue that he couldn't help his upbringing. He certainly wasn't aware when he was being different. But he did know that to admit being different would be to admit a certain kind of defeat, so he always insisted that he was perfectly normal.

'Of course you're normal!' Jo would tell him impatiently. 'But you've still got all the habits of a man who goes his own way, and is used to going his own way, which is all very well if you can do it. But you can't do it on no money. You've got to be rich even to be middle-class these days.'

She had met him first when he was still living on his income. How could she help falling in love with a man like that? He was young, thoughtful, rather gentle, and obviously pig-headed. She had thought him wonderfully clear-eyed and hard-boned and blond. But with his silly preoccupation about his lack of formal schooling he had been trying to get into a university in England. It was just after the war, and no university would have him without a school-leaving certificate. He didn't even have that sort of qualification, and all the money in the world couldn't give it to him. So he had gone back to Athens and stirred around listlessly in the pots and artifacts of a rather dull potters' quarter they had started digging near Corinth, but the Greek civil war had been too unpleasant for him to feel that this was right. He could not live on his dilettantism while Greece was burning up with napalm. He had left Athens and gone back to England, where his restlessness had suggested Mexico. But he had realized in time what a future he was making for himself if he didn't change this aimless lack of direction, so he had gone to his friends in the Navy and asked them if he could go back to the meteorological service, where he had been convalescing when the war ended. If this was the one useful technical education he had had, then he might as well use it.

He had joined the miniature Navy meteorological service as a civilian, and he had tried to settle down; but it was not easy. The work was tedious and dull, and he had realized again that he was already facing another choice. If he left this work because it was

dull, he knew he would never hold down a job again. The pressure of his father always seemed to be on him. It seemed important then (though it seemed exaggerated later on) that he must stick it out. In any case, he had been worried about his money for years. There were too many reasons why he must hate it and mistrust its effect on him, so it seemed logical and clear-cut at the time that he give it up. He *had* to give up his money if he ever wanted to make something of his life.

It was not as difficult as he thought it would be. It was more or less an impulse, but he had simply made over all the shares and insurance policies and stocks and his share in the family sinking-fund bonds to his mother, through the family lawyer who had tried to talk him out of it. Rupert had not consulted his mother, and she had eventually acknowledged her sudden lift in capital and income with a letter which asked Rupert what she should do about tax on it, and what she should do about her will. Should everything be left to him anyway?

The lawyers had already explained his point of view to her, but she was not very interested in it, and only anxious to solve her own problem. She didn't think him mad or sane or drunk. It was all normal to her, everything was normal, so that he had replied briefly but conclusively: 'Do what you like!' He knew that some day she would leave him the lot, hers as well, and perhaps this was really a small escape-hatch which he kept open. But he refused to allow himself the comfort of it in the meantime.

'I'll give it all to someone or something worth while,' he had decided. The truth was that he still didn't like to see the money being wasted, even money which was no longer his.

He was therefore 'poor' when Jo met him for the second time, but he had just achieved (through friends) a more interesting job—not in the miniature Navy meteorological service, but in the Meteorological Office itself, where there was a new and special department for polar upper-atmosphere research, closely linked with a special study which several universities' physics departments were making of high weather. It was here that he began to find some stability, and even felt that perhaps this would do.

The only difficulty was that it soon became a department for qualified physicists and mathematicians, rather than for men like him who were primarily observers. It was part of the conflict

developing in meteorology itself between its older mechanistic character as an observational method, to a more objective science whose new methods were to be far more theoretically elaborate—a method based on the numerical system of possibilities. That kind of mathematics was beyond him, and Phillips-Jones—his boss—tried to avoid talking to Rupert about anything save his particular and limited and tight-minded usefulness as a reader of instruments, a recorder of observation. Phillips-Jones reminded him as often as he could that he was no scientist.

But he was conscientious and deliberate, and (he thought) faithful in his attitude to his work. Naturally wills clashed, his opinions were always firm, his ideas were original enough; but whatever his academic limitation, his work was holy. It had all his respect.

He had married Jo then. She had been shocked by his folly—giving up all his money. She was determined to persuade him to get it all back again. She was not grasping. She was very honest and sane about it. Why be so stupid? There was nothing wrong with having money, was there? She didn't know her own husband yet, and though she would love him rich or poor anyway, she hoped that he would some day be intelligent enough to get it all back. So far he had been adamant about it. 'In fact it's *because* I'm married to you that I don't want it back,' he told her. He didn't want her to suffer what his own mother had suffered. What had she suffered? He wasn't sure, but he knew his mother would have been a better woman if she'd had a better man.

He was a very lonely and rather strange man then, looking for someone with the spontaneity and the sudden hot heart which would give his perceptions a chance to survive without too much restraint nor yet too much freedom. Jo had been impatient and not at all impressed by his odd character; and not too bothered either by the firm rules he was trying to lay down for his life. He wanted to be practical and useful and normal, which always seemed difficult for him yet so easy for other people. But it was never difficult for her to love a man with golden rules he tried to live by, a man with a complex but honest heart who never thought cruelly of anyone, or ever minded her mean and bad temper, which usually shocked Jo herself when she let it go.

Even so, Rupert was a blindly, stupidly, stubborn man!

'Angelina,' Jo shouted now to her Italian girl after talking on the phone with Wing-Commander Moore who was coming (he said) with news. 'Come and wipe this telephone. It's all sticky.'

'That's children, Miz Royce,' Angelina said.

'No, it isn't. It's you,' Joanna replied irritably. 'You talk to all those Calabrian girls day and night. What on earth do you talk about? And anyway, you come and do it and don't argue.'

'Okay, Miz Royce.'

She was not going to let Angelina upset her, although she couldn't help arguing. Angelina was a strong and intractable girl who would rule the whole household if she could. She was also teaching intractability to Tess who was six, although Tess was naturally stubborn like her father, and that small, serious English face was a powerful reminder of him.

'What do you want for lunch, Miz Royce?' Angelina was asking, unbothered.

'I don't know. Grill the fish,' Joanna told her, still annoyed.

'Okay,' Angelina agreed. 'But what about all that rice?'

'You should have thrown it away yesterday,' Joanna said, but then she thought of the dog. 'Give it to Fidge.'

'Rice not good for Fidge,' Angelina said.

Angelina was being insistently stubborn today and she could stand there solidly as if the world had to go on. She knew what had happened to Rupert. Didn't she ever give in? Jo would not give in herself, but she longed for Angelina to do so, and she resented this stubborn denial of tragedy: this earth-bound edge to life which Angelina must live by—being a poor Italian. She would have been prostrate over a black hearse and a donkey funeral up the bare grey hills of the Calabria, but an hour later her life would be as hard as it had ever been, and Angelina would be as stern and unyielding as ever. Why didn't she give in? She loved Rupert as much as they all did, but she was not going to say a word about him.

'You keep things too long in the refrigerator,' Jo told her. 'That rice should have been thrown out yesterday. One day you'll poison the children . . .'

Angelina was now hurt. 'Nobody here poisons children!' she said indignantly and walked out.

Jo knew that Angelina was now in tears. The strain was beginning to affect her also, and Jo felt the tears come to her own eyes because of her own cruelty and for her own silly anger. 'Oh no!' she said suddenly to herself. 'Don't weep now. Don't do it.' She went into the bathroom to stop it, to wipe her face with cold water and control herself. But she sat on the bath and wept quietly for Rupert until Tess knocked at the door.

'Let me in,' Tess demanded.

'What do you want?' Jo shouted at her daughter angrily.

'I need to go to the bathroom.'

'Then go to the one downstairs.'

'That's too cold, and the door doesn't lock. Let me in.'

Jo bent over the hand basin and washed her face and complained as she opened the door to Tess: 'Why is it that the moment I come in to have a bath or something you always want to join me?'

'But I don't!' Tess insisted the way Angelina would insist. 'I just need the bathroom.'

*

Jo's friend, Dr. Marian Crayford, came to see her in the afternoon to ask if she had heard anything more, and Jo told her that she was waiting for an R.A.F. official with some sort of news. 'If it's bad I'll do away with myself,' Jo said. 'Oh, I hate every bloody thing about Rupert's silly ideas,' she said. 'Why did he have to go to the Arctic in the first place? He didn't have to go. He could have got out of it. He always thinks more of his ridiculous work than he does of us. He's so intractable sometimes . . .'

Dr. Crayford was brushing back Joanna's black hair in affection, something she could safely do, being ten years older and a sadder woman than Jo herself. 'You'd be intractable too if you'd been brought up the way he was,' she said.

'I was brought up *much* wilder than Rupert,' Jo said indignantly.

She was a border girl from Cumberland, a poor but noble farmer's daughter, where poor but noble farmers were remnants of a remote and often spartan life. She was suspicious of all actions outside her own, as all the *franc-tireurs* of the English-Scottish borders might have been if the wars and politics of that

frontier had continued, instead of ending in a Scotch submission and a cunning English compromise.

‘But you’re not *quite* as intractable,’ Marian teased her.

‘I hate the English. I wish I were anything else . . .’

‘Shush!’ Marian said gently.

But Jo was determined to go on being bitter and unpleasant, and she forced Marian Crayford into an argument about the house, which Marian had said she ought to sell and get a smaller one. What did she want with nine large rooms? Jo said that Marian didn’t understand it at all. When Rupert had renounced all his income, that was perfectly all right because it happened before she had married him anyway, and she couldn’t stop it. But this Royce house in Hampstead had been up for disposal, and she had been forced to rescue it. ‘We must have a house,’ Jo—pregnant and very determined—had told her husband. ‘I’m not going to live in a flat with children just so that you can prove a point. That’s not fair, Rupert!’ Rupert had argued in a surprised voice that the big house would be more trouble than it was worth. He had lived in big cold houses all his life, and he preferred a smaller but warmer flat. But Joanna knew too much about being poor to let it go. She had refused to listen to reason. She had said that *he* could go and live in a flat, but she would not. ‘Not if you want me to have children. I simply won’t do it. Never!’ Rupert was in love with his black-haired pregnant wife, but he had taken his time in his maddening way to think about it, and finally he had emerged magnanimously to say that she was probably right. ‘I won’t be able to afford to buy a house in London with two bathrooms in it, so it ought to be yours.’ He had told his mother not to sell the house but to hand it over to Jo. It was her house, and she intended to keep it, despite the expense of running it. Why did Marian argue about it now?

‘You just want to argue,’ Marian told her. ‘So do go ahead!'

‘But it’s true. Why should we sell it?’

‘Because Rupert is right. It’s too big,’ Marian insisted, her gentle eyes welling up and then destroying the feelings which she had for these two. She believed that Rupert was dead, and that the Wing-Commander would come with bad news. She didn’t want to be near to hear it. Poor Jo! She had many resources, plenty of them in fact, and she would probably survive

this fairly well; but it was going to be a terrible thing to see that break when it finally came, as it probably would if this man was quite conclusive.

*

Wing-Commander Moore came (he said) not to reassure her, but to tell her the truth. He said he was a family man himself: two boys and a small girl who was a little older than Tess—whom he called ‘lovey’, and made friends with very quickly. He was a friendly silver-haired man who knew Rupert slightly (he said); and he looked at Jo with almost naive curiosity to see what sort of a wife Rupert Royce (that unusual man) would have. He didn’t know Jo yet. He was seeing her very calm and restrained, because she was reluctant to hear what he had to say, in case it was bad.

‘She’s not going to believe me,’ he decided, looking at those hot purplish eyes and pale face which were so suspicious of him, so he began very gently.

‘In a way,’ he said, ‘we don’t know much at all . . .’

‘Oh, don’t say that,’ Jo interrupted. ‘Please don’t say you don’t know what happened to him. I’ve had enough of that.’

Moore smiled gently. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘I won’t say it.’

In any case (he said), having just come from Thule, in Greenland, he could probably guess now what had happened to Rupert.

‘Then please go ahead,’ Jo told him impatiently.

‘It seems that there was a bad solar storm that day,’ he said, ‘and the only radio communication in their plane was short-wave. Solar storms make a mess of short-wave reception, you know. That was bad luck, really, because we had no communication with them at all for many hours. But the American radar screens traced the plane over its expected course, until it suddenly went too low for detection. That is what I have discovered at Thule . . .’

‘What does it mean?’ she asked. ‘Is he alive?’

‘It means that something probably happened on the ice or to the plane,’ he said patiently.

She waited grimly. She cursed his stupidity. But she was also very much afraid now.

Wing-Commander Moore rose and moved about a little. ‘You know, Mrs. Royce, this radar business is all very good up to a point. But there are tremendous gaps in it. Man really isn’t as clever as he thinks he is. The radar says they went low for some

time. Too low, in fact, for detection. They might even have landed . . . ?

‘Where? On the ice?’

The Wing-Commander shrugged. ‘Yes. Or they might have been in difficulty and got out of it. It’s hard to say.’

‘But what does it all mean?’ she repeated impatiently. ‘I simply don’t understand what you’re getting at. Why wasn’t Rupert on that plane when it crashed at Thule? Where is he? That’s all I want to know.’

He must not hurry, he must be on guard against making any mistakes with her, so he remained his normal cautious self. ‘It’s so full of secrets—the Arctic,’ he said thoughtfully in this (to Jo) maddening way he had of spreading out his rich information as if she were fascinated by it. ‘That’s the real trouble. American secrets, Russian secrets, and our own—for what they’re worth. I don’t know how much your husband told you before he went to Melville Island, or how much he knew himself for that matter. But his job there was concerned with one aspect of original weather—of high-level winds—which was very important to us. It really touches on the problem of fall-out.’

‘I don’t care about that!’ she cried.

‘Yes, that’s hardly the point. The real point is that submarines and aeroplanes of both sides are always investigating the polar regions for military purposes. The Americans, as you probably know, have their biggest air base at Thule, and a huge network of radar and Dewline detection posts right across the north . . .’

Jo had given up hoping for anything now, and instead she was watching him suspiciously. Why didn’t he come out with whatever he was going to say? ‘You mean that Rupert was involved in something unusual? Is that all you’ve come here to say to me?’

He smiled again. ‘Only normally unusual, Mrs. Royce,’ he said. ‘But you know, they possibly saw something odd from that aeroplane. And that’s what we worry about . . .’

‘But I’m only worried about my husband,’ she reminded him. ‘What *happened!*’

‘So are we worried about him, Mrs. Royce. But, after all, there’s more to it than that.’

‘No, there’s not for me . . .’

'Anyway,' he interrupted quickly because he could see that she was going to be very angry with him, 'the Americans have decided to send out a plane to take a look, when the weather is good enough. That's really what I came here to tell you.'

But Jo had not followed it through Moore's slow and courteous emotions. She had felt it excruciatingly through her own skin, and she was aware now that he was actually suggesting a hope. 'Send a plane where?' she asked. 'You mean they know where he is?'

'No, no, no! In fact that's the problem,' Moore said, his bemused gentility gradually (he hoped) persuading her not to hope for too much. 'In the arctic winter there is little chance of finding anything. The weather is always bad at this time of the year, and visibility is nil. There is also another interesting fact I just discovered at Thule. All the rescue equipment and parachutes of the Dakota were not in the wreckage. That is very suggestive indeed . . .'

Jo wanted to scream at him. 'Everything is suggestive,' she said instead. 'But suggestive of what?'

'That he might have jumped out by parachute.'

'Over the ice?'

'Somewhere! But that, I warn you, is a very remote chance.'

'But why would he want to jump out?'

He shook his head vaguely. 'That's what we don't know, and what we will have to look into.'

'If he wasn't in the wreckage he must be somewhere.'

'He just might be on the ice,' he said. 'But that's not at all probable, Mrs. Royce. That's about all I can say. We will send a plane, though, to take a look.'

She was unnerved now, she was like a woman on the very brink of child-birth. How could she keep her sanity in those last few moments . . .

'Then I must wait again,' she said miserably.

'I'm afraid so. The weather . . .'

'Oh, I know all about that arctic weather!' she cried. 'It's always bad.'

'There's also the problem of sea ice,' he said. 'It breaks up and drifts. It will not be easy to calculate . . .'

She could not keep up her calm face much longer, and she

burst out angrily: 'Why didn't they do all this before? Weeks ago . . .'

'It takes a little time to sift things you know. Please believe me.'

She sat before the fire, not caring about him, and asking herself now if Rupert were really dead. Could it really be possible?

The complexity of him being dead was now more convincing than the simple way she had kept him alive. Why had he gone to the Arctic? Why had he made such stupid rules for his life? Why was he in love with these myths, his work, his insistence on being useful. Wasn't life itself useful enough?

'When will you start looking for him?' she asked slowly.

'Everything depends on the weather,' Moore repeated gently, aware that she was probably worse off now than she had been before. He felt very sorry for her.

But though she was pale, it was clear that she was not going to break down in front of a man. She was withdrawn, barely polite, and she was obviously waiting for him to go now. Moore felt upset by the effect he had had on her, but he knew it was better not to sympathize, and he left her before her discipline broke, and before her lips trembled and her eyes betrayed her.

Chapter Seven

The wind had died down and there seemed to be a long, drifting stillness all around them. The drip of some condensed drop of water inside the fuselage turned into a tiny drum-beat. Rupert slept heavily and Vodopyanov tried to cook.

‘It’s the light. It’s gone again,’ Vodopyanov said when Rupert awakened in darkness. Vodopyanov said he could not reach the paraffin drum to fill the lamp.

A dim flicker came from the stove, and Rupert tried to emerge from a long dark well of unquenchable sleep. He had been asleep for two days.

‘If I could only keep awake,’ he complained wearily in the cold darkness.

He had suspected carbon monoxide poisoning at first, but he still believed that there was too much draught to justify it, too many small cracks and holes in the fuselage on the windward side. He suspected now that he might have pneumonia, because every movement demanded a tremendous effort, far beyond him, and he was nauseated by every breath he took.

‘You mustn’t give up now,’ Vodopyanov was saying to him in the silence, in the yellow darkness. ‘It’s not so bad, Rupert, eh? Not so bad,’ he kept reassuring and repeating loudly.

Rupert longed to sleep, to doze off into the emptiness which surrounded them—not only in darkness, but in this cold and compact and crowded and black world. He could just see Vodopyanov, who was a dark and filthy shadow lying in a clump of bedding. He felt like laughing at this spectacle: the two of them sealed in here, in this complete but enormous limitation of the fuselage, while outside, beyond that metal wall, there was a frozen world that was already nothing a hundred yards from them; a hundred yards and they would be lost in the low black

night and in the expanse of smoky-grey snow which moaned gently and disappeared into far, far horizons, empty of life.

‘You have to get up,’ Vodopyanov told him.

‘Yes, I know,’ he said helplessly.

The thought appalled him—that he had to emerge from this warm but wretched bundle and stand up. Even to stand up would be a miracle. But he had to dress and get the snow and fill the lamp and fill the stove also.

One minute, and another minute more.

‘You must get up!’ Vodopyanov shouted loudly again. ‘Come, Rupert. Get up, eh? It’s not so good.’

Rupert got up. He was stung by the encouragement, and he resented Vodopyanov’s persuasion. ‘All right, all right!’ he said impatiently.

‘Good. Much better up,’ Vodopyanov said cheerfully.

Rupert got out of the bedroll and pulled on his revolting underclothes and then his filthy shirt and jackets and socks and boots and he knew he was a hollow man, without any kind of internal support at all. He filled the stove and the lamp with paraffin, and then he lit the lamp and took the tin they used for the snow and went out into the entrance tunnel which was blocked. He had to sit down before he could work.

‘Rupert?’ he heard.

‘Ah, damn you, be quiet,’ Rupert shouted back.

‘Get up,’ Vodopyanov said fiercely. ‘Don’t sit out there, eh? Please get up, Rupert.’

There was no panic in his voice, but a hard demand which Royce knew was there to save him. He was a consistently saving man, this Russian, and Rupert laughed at the idiocy of it. This weak and helpless desire to laugh with a hollow stomach and no force (no strength but a delicious weakness swamping him) didn’t worry him yet. It was, in fact, pleasant to feel this off like disintegration taking hold.

‘I’m sorry,’ he apologized to Vodopyanov. ‘I’m on him again, worry.’

‘...ov what his wife
He had to dig into the side of the snow to like me. There aren’t but it was frozen solid. He hacked at grey. It’s all right in its couldn’t move a piece of it. He was today, I can tell you that,’ he to dislodge enough ice or solid snowwgh . . .’

with, but it was too solid and compressed, and the laughter went away. He was already weeping with helpless effort (hopeless!) when he found a soft enough patch, where the opening should have been.

'Oh my God,' he said, the tears running down his face. 'That's saved me this time.'

The opening into the tunnel was blocked, but it didn't matter. It simply meant that they were completely sealed in now, and it would take a great effort to move that wall of snow. He hacked enough away to fill the tin, and he took it into the fuselage with the light.

'We're sealed in,' he said to Vodopyanov.

It was as much as he could say, because he felt dizzy and sick and he fell onto the bedroll and lay there grasping at consciousness like a man fighting for survival in a crowd. It was certainly a very crowded oblivion that wanted him, but he came out of it.

'... it must be the lamp,' he heard Vodopyanov say urgently. 'You must be poisoned...'

'What's that?' he said. 'What?'

'You must be poisoned,' Vodopyanov told him. 'You behave like it. You're sick like that. Are you sick?'

'Faint,' he said. 'Very faint.'

'It must be poisoned air,' Vodopyanov insisted and urged him to get up again.

'Don't keep saying that,' Rupert said, tiredly rather than angrily. 'It's not possible.'

'I must say it to you. Get up...'

But Rupert could not get up. He could not argue with Vodopyanov any more. It was too complicated. It *might* be carbon monoxide poisoning, yet he still felt somehow, in his intelligence,

... there was too much draught from the windward cracks. And surrounded Vodopyanov himself affected?

compact air in the entrance tunnel,' Vodopyanov said. 'And I am, who was...?' He could not think of the English word and bedding. He felt... resist better, that's the point. Do you get me?' sealed in here. in the sudden, annoying Americanisms.

fuselage, while outside air,' Rupert said sleepily.

frozen world that was a... nov insisted. 'We ought to make much them; a hundred yards and to do.'

How to achieve more air without making it too cold?

The temperature of the fuselage was now below zero. With a larger hole it would be even colder. Yet the logic was obvious, because Rupert began to be sick—dryly and horribly—and that was a fairly sure sign of carbon monoxide, which (Rupert remembered clearly) had killed far more arctic explorers than the cold had.

‘I suppose that’s the trouble,’ he said dreamily.

‘What are you saying? Get up. For God’s sake, get up, Rupert!’

‘You’re probably right,’ Rupert said slowly. He was already trying to think clearly of this new adversary.

It did not occur to them to turn out the stove and the light which were causing the poison. That would be turning out life itself in their filthy dark hole. Rupert got up again and listened to Vodopyanov telling him what to do.

‘I know! I know!’ he shouted irritably.

He knew what he would do, but Vodopyanov was telling him to knock a hole in the leeward side of the fuselage with the axe and then they could blanket the hole with something. But Rupert knew that it would be too direct, too cold. He had already begun to hate the cold with a passionate and frightened dismay.

‘Too cold,’ he said to Vodopyanov briefly. ‘It’s not good, really.’

Instead he got the axe and began to prise off a channel of aluminium which covered wires and cables. It went on into the blocked end of the fuselage which he had filled in with snow. He tore weakly at it, and he fell from time to time, exhausted. He got up again, ripped at it again, and when he had six or eight feet of it clear he lay down and rested, until he heard Vodopyanov talking him back into this yellow consciousness.

‘I mustn’t do that,’ he said aloud. ‘I must not go off like that.’

But this good-humoured disintegration came on him again, and he sat down and began to tell Vodopyanov what his wife would think of all this. ‘My wife is not at all like me. There aren’t any greys in Jo’s life, absolutely nothing grey. It’s all right in its own way but she’d think this pretty silly, I can tell you that,’ he said with a wayward laugh. ‘Although . . .’

'Never mind all that now,' Vodopyanov cried. 'Get on with it. Stand up and get on with what you were doing. If I could only move!' he cried helplessly.

'All right!' Rupert's mind warned him. 'You must move.'

He returned to the channelling. He had a wonderful scheme, all perfectly clear. He would cut the channel in half, then clamp the two pieces together lengthways to form a square pipe, which he would hold together with wire. Then he would cut a hole in the leeward side and push the pipe out through it, go outside, climb on the fuselage, anchor it, and that would be a very effective ventilator, and not so cold . . .

He was working on it, hacking the channel in half.

'Stop it! Stop it!' Vodopyanov was shouting.

'What's the matter now?' he asked.

'What are you doing? You'll cut your foot off. You're cutting the bed . . .'

'That's all right,' Rupert said.

He looked at the length of channel which he had put across his bedroll, and he could distinguish terrible dents all over it. The axe was half-up. He looked at Vodopyanov who was falling out of his bed trying to get hold of the channel.

'What are you up to?' he said to the Russian.

'You don't know what you're doing,' the Russian said. 'Just put the axe down, eh? Put it down, Rupert . . .'

'What for?' he said angrily. 'I'm perfectly all right.'

'Put it down.' Vodopyanov was getting weak.

Rupert hacked on. Then he stopped and went over and helped the faint and helpless Vodopyanov back on to the bed, and sat down near him and began to explain his theory about the channels. But Vodopyanov was trying to take the axe from him, and he would not let it go. What on earth did Vodopyanov want with the axe? He laughed at the Russian and said agreeably that all Russians seemed homicidal, but Vodopyanov was not going to outwit him.

'There's no reason for you to worry!' he said to Vodopyanov.

He staggered around the fuselage and faintly heard Vodopyanov shouting about the stove. He fell down several times and then began, as the next part of his scheme, to hack a hole in the fuselage. He must be very careful to cut it on the leeward side. He

could not see. It was terribly dark. But he was sure that it was all right. Anywhere here or there, and he hacked at the fuselage with the axe, falling down and getting up, and determinedly proceeding with his plan. He must finish . . .

‘Okay?’ he said to Vodopyanov, who no longer said anything but watched him helplessly as he beat at the side of the fuselage with the axe.

Rupert fell down after one giant swing which cut a slashing hole in the side, and he lay bundled up in a heap, eyes open, saying nothing, but enjoying the pleasures of success. Had he succeeded? He wasn’t at all sure. But as he rolled over he could just hear Vodopyanov’s ill-tempered shouting in Russian.

‘*Nichevo!*’ Rupert whispered cheerfully before losing consciousness.

*

After watching this performance, Vodopyanov knew that he dare not lose his head, no matter how much panic he felt. He lay still for a while to decide what he must do. What could he even try to do? He did not know yet if Rupert were dead or not. The Englishman was curled up in a clumsy lump near the hole he had cut low down on the fuselage, on the windward side, and the outside cold air was already knifing its way into the fuselage.

‘I know. I know!’ Vodopyanov said to himself aloud as he made up his mind.

He must reach the Englishman somehow to see what state he was in, because if he were dead there was going to be a very grim situation to face.

‘*Nu, Tovarish,*’ he said sadly to himself. ‘*Thou must! Thou indeed must!*’

It was all very well for *thee* to say what *thou* must do, Tovarish. But a man paralysed from the waist down and weakened from the waist up was more or less helpless, whatever his mind told his body to do.

He rolled off the bed and almost knocked the light over.

He cried out in pain, afraid that he would faint. He was lying on his stomach unable to turn back again, and his stomach was like a fiery ball. If only he could feel his legs and back. He concentrated. He was sweating. The tears were running down his cheeks. He called out to his legs. They were there, but there was

absolutely nothing he could do to move them. He had willed them passionately to move, but they defied him.

‘*Chort! Chort!*’ he cried bitterly and closed his eyes.

He could raise his chin and see the curled lump of Englishman, a lazy shaggy spaniel in his bulky clothes. But Vodopyanov was naked from the waist down himself, and on the floor it was not going to be very good, particularly if he could not feel his lower limbs at all.

He tried to pull himself forward. He got a grip on Rupert’s bedroll, but it moved. Everything moved. The mat on the metal floor moved. He pulled it away and dug his fingers into the frozen metal and pulled himself forward. It was impossible to get a grip, but he dug his fingernails into the rivets.

It would have been easy if he had been strong, but he was childishly weak, and he was exhausted when he reached Rupert. He lay near him, breathing the cold shaft of air which blew gently through the gash in the side.

‘Ah, Vodopyanov,’ he told himself sadly. ‘It’s not thy lucky day.’

He moved closer and pulled at this English spaniel whose matted hair and beard were already stiff with cold.

‘Are you alive?’ he shouted. ‘Eh? Why don’t you wake up?’

Rupert was alive, and he breathed with his nose and eyes. His eyes were half-opened and half-closed, and his long straight beard moved gently under his lips.

‘I thank thee for that!’ Vodopyanov said, thanking nobody in particular. Although it was probably the Englishman he thanked, because he knew that this Englishman meant everything to his own existence.

But he had to get Rupert back into the bedroll, and he began—at first with his hands and then with his head and finally with his teeth—pulling and pushing and rolling him. But what a monstrous thing it was—this soft and vast body of English flesh. Rupert was, in fact, very thin and hard; but nevertheless what a giant he was. Ah, what a giant . . .

He did not know how long it took him nor how he did it, but having covered the Englishman, having achieved that much, he was too weak in the arms to save himself. He had done all that he could possibly do. ‘Let me lie a little while,’ he said. But he over-

came that dangerous idea and moved towards his bed. He pulled down the bedroll, he got into it (head first and in a complicated manner, but into it) and he lay wavering between darkness and dawn, between the nonsense he talked to himself and the silence of this intangible and formidable world.

It was nearly a metaphysical experience for Vodopyanov, and he fell into a deep but dreamless sleep.

They awakened sometimes, and they slept again.

Vodopyanov once managed to cook an oatmeal stew with a meat block, and he ate it out of the pot; but he could not awaken Rupert, so he lay back and thought of his wife and of their now-childless marriage. Once there had been a daughter. 'No,' he sighed unhappily. 'There will be no more Vodopyanovs.' Nina should marry again. Each day she should forget him a little more. He ought to be dead already, and Nina's sorrow should have come and gone by now. Her life should have already, of necessity, passed over him.

But he knew it was not so. They had always supported each other too intimately, they had been far too close for this to be true. It would take her a long time to recover. In fact he would like to survive this if only to spare her one more terrible sorrow, one more brutal tragedy.

'But Nina,' he wanted to tell her. 'Don't take a pilot this time. Pilots are too often gone, and too far away. They are always a step on the way to a tragedy like this. All pilots long for a good home. They want to live in one place, in a warm apartment, with plenty of strong white lights. That's what he likes to come home to. You should never fight with the neighbours, and never live in a muddy road, nor buy cupboards, nor worry about the post-woman losing the letters . . .'

These were his own worries, not Nina's, but he sighed and wished her well. A young man, perhaps, and children. He wanted her to be happy. The children ought to be arranged. There ought to be something she could do about her bad luck with children. She should now have had one son or one living, lovely, happy daughter—'Galia! Galia!' One legacy of himself to bequeath to the long white future. He was so in love with his dead Galia

and his never-to-be-born children, with their bright faces and brushed hair, their childish perfection and good humour, that he regretted them for her sake far more than anything else in this tragedy; and he turned sadly to the Englishman to see if he had emerged from his poisoned sleep.

‘Rupert!’ he said.

Royce could not come out of it. He moved a little, but he did not reply.

Vodopyanov was feeling very sentimental. He would like to have talked about his life because they were in a very bad way now, and it might as well end with the recollection of a life well-lived.

But then he seemed, for a moment, to be hearing from another world.

There was no wind outside, or very little. The slight grasping hiss of the hard snow on the fuselage was a passing and yet continuous sound. There were other soft sounds. The lamp and the stove made a faint buzz, the fuselage cracked and snarled, and sometimes the ice would heave in a large and thunderous roar as it broke a little, or squeezed or buckled.

But he was sure now that there was another noise outside: the far-away growl of an aeroplane.

Vodopyanov believed it immediately. It was clearly a plane, and though he listened rigidly for a moment, astounded, he knew it was so.

‘My God! My God, Rupert!’ he shouted. ‘That’s a plane. That’s an aeroplane. Get up, get up!’ he bellowed in Russian.

Rupert was not to be moved. He groaned slightly to indicate something received, but that was all.

Vodopyanov became a frantic man, listening to the faint owlish sound of the plane coming closer. Reluctant as he was to lose the sound, even for a second, he rolled over and pulled hard at Rupert’s hair and beard and shouted again:

‘Oh, get up, eh! It’s a plane. There’s a plane flying above our head outside. It’s a plane and you must get up. Please, Rupert! For the sake of your children, get up!’

He leaned over and bit Rupert hard on the ear.

Royce stirred and opened his sick eyes. He looked at Vodopyanov stupidly but Vodopyanov was shouting the same word over

and over again, and eventually Royce heard it and emerged from his dark plateau, wondering though what the Russian's frantic and wild face was doing over him.

'You must get outside on the ice to show them,' Vodopyanov was shaking and beating him unmercifully, his face phantom-esque and unreal. He broke into Russian in his excitement and then Royce heard the plane.

'Can't you get up?' the Russian was appealing now. 'Come on! Come on!'

It dawned slowly on Royce what was happening and what was expected of him—faintly but clearly enough. There was a plane? He could grasp that, and he kept hold of the fact although it kept slipping from his mind.

He was still anaesthetized, but he got to his feet, and swaying and staggering about he fell over Vodopyanov who groaned in pain. Then he picked himself up and said, 'Wait. For heaven's sake wait!' and he took the light and fell down heavily into the snow tunnel. The light went out and Vodopyanov groaned. Royce lay still and he felt Vodopyanov near him, he heard Vodopyanov finding the light and rolling over and lighting it; and he wondered how Vodopyanov managed to do it.

The light showed him the trembling, sweating, crawling, wax-like Vodopyanov.

'You must dig and get out, Rupert. I can't.'

Vodopyanov was lying exhausted, and Rupert stood up and began to dig with the snow shovel on the sides of the tunnel, but it was frozen too hard for his weak blows, so he fell down into the hut again and got up and found the axe and began to hack at the tunnel without knowing why, and yet knowing very clearly why. Where could he break it? Why wouldn't it give? Why can't it collapse?

The aeroplane was near, and was probably not very high, but he banged at the wall of snow with his weak arms and he could not break through.

'Harder!' Vodopyanov shouted from the floor and then in Russian: 'If you can't do it, they'll fly away . . .'

The rhythm of the engines was now at its peak, not overhead but somewhere very near, and Rupert hacked weakly at the ice without making any effect on it.

‘I can’t do it,’ he said. ‘It’s quite hopeless.’

‘But you can,’ Vodopyanov encouraged in Russian, hearing the engines begin to fade slightly. ‘Ah, Rupert, for the love of God, eh? You must fight now. There’s nothing else for us now. You must *fight!*’

What did it all mean? Rupert wanted to know.

He was not convinced at all, but he swung a tremendous blow at the ice wall and fell down again. He was through. The rest was easy and he got up and hit the edges of ice and it crumbled from the top and then the side fell in. There was a large hole.

‘Take the light . . .’

He took it, the cold air pressing on him, nauseating him; but he pushed out through the hole and was amazed. The confinement had been so thorough, so complete, that he had forgotten the vast openness and the incredible blue of the ice and the night. It was very clear. The world was so grey and tremendous and empty that he forgot the plane for a moment.

Then he remembered it, and he felt the air in his lungs. Where was the plane? He could hear it, it was not far off. He looked up, and it was the darkness of noon rather than the darkness of midnight. The sky was faintly light to the south-east.

He saw the plane. Its lights blinked, and its engine rolled gently.

‘Come back,’ he cried out.

It was going away. He waved the lantern, he flung it back and forth violently as if the plane must see it; but it did not. He stumbled after it a few paces, but what was the use of that? It was disappearing into the light horizon to the south, not very high, but far, far away.

Chapter Eight

It shocked Rupert, realizing that they had been ready to die; preparing, in fact, the slow disarmament of their last but tenuous desire to struggle. They had been going out quietly . . .

The outside world had saved him from that. It was not even the cold air but the world itself, the surrounding grey, the white frozen night, the enormous pale emptiness of the horizon they were living on.

‘No more living like wasps in a cocoon,’ he announced weakly to Vodopyanov. He was still sick.

But Vodopyanov was very depressed about the plane. They had been tense and quiet, rigid for two days listening for its return; but it would never come back now.

‘That plane was looking for us,’ Vodopyanov said.

‘You think so?’ Rupert asked. ‘It doesn’t matter anyway. What could it have done? No plane could land on all that humped-up ice.’

That was a lie. He had also been surprised to see how much of the ice had been cut down by the wind, how comparatively level a great deal of the new ice had become; but he said nothing to Vodopyanov about it. The Russian hadn’t seen it.

They argued bitterly about the plane, and though Royce was not yet safe or completely alert, he knew that Vodopyanov was again contemplating (in his own sickness) the noble act. He was obviously thinking that one of them ought to survive, one of them might escape somehow; and Vodopyanov knew very well that he was the real burden.

‘Listen,’ Rupert appealed to Vodopyanov. ‘If I don’t get you out of this somehow, then what’s been the point of all this to me?’

Vodopyanov would never admit his own intentions, but Rupert knew what he was thinking. He watched the Russian closely, knowing that sooner or later now he was going to do something

gentlemanly but suicidal. He was very depressed about the plane.

In the meantime, Rupert had decided to regulate their lives again, and he began painfully to wash his sores, to rebuild the snow tunnel, and to make the exit wide enough and on a leeward bend so that it could be kept open. This exhausted him, but he would never give in again. He repaired the gash he had made in the fuselage with a cushion and snow, and he made another one higher and better, and blanketed it with a fragment of parachute. Thereafter he arranged each day into small controllable shifts, some of which he would spend outside, even in bad weather. But he was worried about Vodopyanov, and he started his Russian lessons again, and he ostentatiously prepared his navigation instruments for the day (he said) when he would get a fix on something. Inside the fuselage he began to build the sled again, carefully, and he massaged Vodopyanov's useless and cold legs every day and cleaned out the mess near Vodopyanov's bed and replaced it with a small pit of snow and ice.

He did not need to create the small world they lived in—these duties of subsistence; there was in fact more work to be done than he had time for. Every day, in the rediscovered but very pale noontime, he would venture outside and walk about stiffly, looking for more supplies, for anything at all; and though he did not expect to unearth anything on the smoothed-out ice (he had to cover up one of the Russian bodies again) he did one day find the rubber dinghy which was half-inflated and bundled up in a curious frozen shape under a snow ledge, with a frozen parachute attached.

'That's a bit of luck,' he told Vodopyanov dragging it inside. 'We can use this when we leave.'

Did Rupert plan to leave here in that? Vodopyanov asked.
'No. But once we do get going, we'll need it,' Rupert said. 'It's big enough for two, and a few supplies.'

Vodoyanov laughed. 'I get sea-sick,' he said.
He had slowly recovered his humour and he was curious about the outside, now that the noonday was trying to emerge from the perpetual prison of darkness. He questioned Rupert closely about it. Was it very light? Was all the new ice piling up higher or was it flat? He knew a great deal about the Arctic, and Rupert did not

hide anything now but told him that there were large flat areas. There were no open leads of water yet, but Vodopyanov still guessed that they were drifting rapidly through the polar sea and probably they were now very far north of Greenland, if they were not at the pole itself. That was the general direction of the drift.

'When the weather settles,' Rupert promised him, 'I'll get you outside, and you can see for yourself.'

But the weather became bad again. The wind smashed down on them once more and shook the fuselage. Once more the days were almost lost, and the fuselage lifted and vibrated and rattled, but Rupert still made his daily excursions outside, although it was so fierce and cold sometimes that he could barely move along the few feet of fuselage, where he crouched in the flying drift, almost longing to die. In this torment of darkness and misery, he decided that he was already a monument to himself—not to his endurance, but to his own past theories on individual self-sufficiency, and to the man who must attend to himself in a crowded world. How did his theories for living in civilization work here, when he would stumble back alone in the darkness feeling the nearness of annihilation outside, and the wasteful and stupid message of time inside?

'I had a very firm idea once,' he said to Vodopyanov, shivering but stripping off his clothes and getting rapidly into the sleeping-roll and tucking it all up around his chin and waiting for the warmth of his body to heat him up. 'I had a wonderful theory that a man must do his best by himself, and it would get him through anything.' And he went on to say that he had now changed his mind about that. 'I must have been very stupid,' he said rather contemptuously, feeling himself able (out here) to abandon one principle of life, even one so painfully acquired and paid for. 'Yes,' he said casually, 'when I get back I'll have to look into that again. A man alone is merely an animal . . .'

He supposed that Vodopyanov did not really understand, but the Russian surprised him because he '*nu-nued*' in his particular sighing way and said, 'It's quite right what you say, Rupert. All theories about how to live life are finished out here. Every little one of them. What matters here? Only living. Nothing else. Not a thing! Who would choose to live like this, eh? Who would really want it s'?' So alone like this, so wasteful, eh?'

Rupert was too concentrated on warming himself to say anything more, except that he was so cold that nothing would ever warm him again, absolutely nothing at all.

It was comparatively easy for them, for a few weeks until they decided that they must begin to prepare to leave, to think of that serious effort to head south in six or eight weeks' time.

They speculated seriously now on where they were, and where 'south' would take them.

Rupert emerged one noonday and saw a strange square hole of red light above the southern horizon. It was not the sun, but the reflected pre-view of it, upside down in the grey clouds, which was burning red and purple in that odd cube of sky. He decided elatedly then that they would survive it. The sight of that red and purple streak of genuine light was a revelation, and he wondered if he had ever seen anything so wonderful in his life. He stood for an hour on the tail of the plane (which was now a large snow-drift as high as a house) watching the reflected light slowly moving and flowing and fading.

'Soon we'll try to get a fix on it,' he told Vodopyanov carefully, although how he didn't know, because he had no chronometer and they had lost track of the days somewhere. But at least it would be possible to take a latitude, without accurate time, by a meridian altitude of the sun, or even by polar star.

He watched these preliminary streaks of light day by day, until the sun itself finally appeared: a mere glowing tip above the light horizon, then the whole ball, then one day a little curving course of a few minutes up and a few minutes down, and finally the awakening of the greenish ice-field around them into a soft, cold, yellow windy day of one hour, of two hours; and then a day when he did not stop for more than a few minutes to notice it at all.

Now it was time to pull Vodopyanov outside.

Vodopyanov pushed himself up on his elbows to see it, saying in Russian that the daylight was the very devil. 'The devil to thee,' he cried joyfully and he was very happy and optimistic. 'That's good luck for us,' he said. 'The sun is high up, Rupert. We must be more south than we think. We may be near the Wendel Sea, even far east of Greenland itself. Think of that.'

But if they were too far east of Greenland, it would be no use going due south, because that would simply take them into open ocean.

'We'll have to find out exactly where we are somehow,' Rupert said, 'because there's not much use setting out anywhere, unless we know whether we are heading blindly into the open sea, or towards the land. We can't afford to make even a small error.'

Exactly where they were began to occupy them now, and they speculated over the charts for two days before Rupert began the difficult reconstruction of everything that had happened, trying to recover what day it was, at least, because he would need that for any kind of bearing.

The weather stormed again, and the sun had gone; but when it reappeared Rupert stood outside in the sharp polar wind on the snow, and when the sun climbed a little, he began to use the bubble sextant and await the sun's zenith. He had already found the true north and south line, as near as he could calculate in these highly irregular magnetic areas, and he waited until the sun rose no higher, and he took the reading on the azimuth scale and began then the business of working out the correction on the sextant and the true altitude. He looked up the tables for the sun's declination for the calculated day, and he wrote it down. The declination and latitude were both the same in direction, so he added them and found the latitude of their position. It was over 95 degrees 14 minutes, which meant that they had drifted almost to the north pole, and were so far away from all land now that their situation would be hopeless.

Vodopyanov refused to believe it. 'You are wrong,' he insisted. 'The sun wouldn't be so high in that latitude now. Ninety-five degrees? No, no! We are farther south.'

Rupert argued for his figures, but he wasn't sure and he certainly did not want it to be so.

They worked it out for a day earlier, but the latitude results were just as unlikely because this time it placed them at 83 degrees 90 minutes, which could be halfway down the land mass of Greenland or in permanently open water, which was also silly.

'Unless,' Rupert cried, 'we've drifted down the Lincoln Sea to Robeson Channel. If so, we'll be all right . . .'

Vodopyanov did not agree with this either. 'The arctic drift goes the other way. And even if we were that near land, the ice would be packed up high. We would be in open water in Robeson Channel at this time,' Vodopyanov said, 'because there's always an open-water channel running up into Lincoln Sea.'

How did Vodopyanov know that? Rupert wondered. Just how well does he know the Greenland coasts? They had never discussed it, never questioned in all this time why they were here or what either one of them had been doing in these northern latitudes. Rupert shook off bad thoughts. He didn't want to know what Vodopyanov and his dead crew—buried in the snow outside—had been doing.

He took another azimuth reading the next day and this time he worked it out to the approximate local noonday estimate from Vodopyanov's watch and the tables, and it came out the same, 83 degrees, within a few minutes either way.

'It's latitude 83 and 2 minutes,' Vodopyanov said firmly. 'This time it's right.'

'Yes, but exactly where? To the east or to the west?'

'We might be halfway round the pole or out above the Atlantic,' Alexei said.

'If I knew how the old navigators did it,' Rupert complained bitterly, 'I could find the longitude, without too much error, with what time we've got.' He thought back into the fog of his Navy memory to find out, but if he had ever known the old method of fixing before there were radio time-signals he had forgotten it completely now.

'There is a way with east and west stars for finding out the local mean time,' Vodopyanov said, 'but you need to decide which stars there are in your English almanac, and in the sky.'

He obviously knew the English almanac well, and English navigational methods also, a small bell said in Rupert's ear. But he refused again to pursue it. Perhaps all methods were the same, although he knew that the French did it differently.

' . . . but we would need a theodolite,' Vodopyanov said, 'to be accurate.'

'We don't have to be too accurate,' Rupert argued. 'Even an

error of one degree won't matter, and these bubble sextants are very good.'

Vodopyanov was thinking and he did not answer. Lying on his back he closed his eyes and sought for his own memory, and when he had spent a day remembering and then another day working out the exact method of complex sights with Rupert, and a third day while Rupert looked in the dark sky for the identifiable stars, they were then ready to try it out. But the weather delayed them again. It had clouded over and it blew hard for three days.

While they waited for it to clear they prepared seriously to leave the fuselage. Rupert's new sled, which he had made from a long metal companion ladder, was arranged and rearranged, and he tried it out, pulling it around on the ice with a parachute harness attached to it and to his shoulders. It was large enough to take not only Vodopyanov but his bed also. They argued about this. 'It's more weight,' Vodopyanov said. Rupert said it weighed nothing. 'And I can pull the whole bed off when necessary,' he insisted. The food powder they had been saving, and the rifle and cartridges, were packed in parachute silk, and though they talked of how they would have to cut down weight to a minimum, taking only their sleeping-bags and nothing else (except perhaps the small rubber dinghy and a light silk emergency tent) there was always a moment when Vodopyanov would say in sad argument:

'You cannot pull me, Rupert. You can't pull me even ten kilometres in that sled, and we might have to do several hundred over difficult ice. What will happen when we reach the ice jams, or the thousand crevices and pressure ridges? How then, eh?'

'I don't know *how then*,' Rupert would reply irritably, 'but we'll have to do it.'

'Not so! I think you should go alone and leave me and send a plane back. I will be all right here . . .'

Rupert was beginning to hate this high purpose of Vodopyanov's, even while understanding it. It didn't help him, didn't Vodopyanov see that? He would never leave the Russian, and that was that.

'Then we ought to try out your sled once more before we set out,' Vodopyanov said. 'Just a little way.'

'No!' Rupert insisted. He said he had already tried it and

retried it, and even though it was without its main burden—Vodopyanov himself—he was convinced it was the best he could do. ‘The sled’s all right. It’ll work. But when we do start from here we must go right on. When we know where we are, we can leave. We’ll take the chance on the sled.’

They could not agree; yet they had to agree because it was Rupert’s decision about the sled, and Vodopyanov shrugged and accepted it. But it was Vodopyanov’s eventual decision to take the direction—east, not west.

*

The weather cleared again and white low clouds were washed by the wind over the thin-starred sky; but their complex system of star sighting took twelve hours to complete because Vodopyanov in his bed outside could not work easily. They had to change their chosen stars, because they had failed on the first four to catch the meridians. But they achieved the altitude of the next four stars, left and right, and they computed in a common mathematical formula the altitude and from this they worked out the error in the clock from the east and west reading, and for local mean-time. From here they could approximate Greenwich, and in one final complex mathematical day and one more midday of meridian, chasing the sun, they found their longitude.

Again it was unbelievable.

‘One hundred and fifteen degrees four minutes. We went west,’ Rupert said in amazement. ‘Almost south in fact. We are nowhere near Greenland, but way off to the south-west towards the Beaufort Sea, north of Canada, even west of Borden Island. We drifted a long way down the Labrador current.’

Vodopyanov was too exhausted to be excited about it, but Rupert was already telling himself that he was very pleased, because he knew he could at least hope to reach Mould Bay where there was a settlement, or even Melville Island (where he had started from) over open sea ice, which was better than trying to cross the northern part of Greenland itself. The sea ice would now be flat, but they would have to hurry before it broke up for the late spring. They had been four and a half months on the ice and Rupert calculated that it left them three months to reach Mould Bay or Melville Island before the summer sea ice broke up under them. After all, they were floating on a frozen ocean.

'We must start in the next day or two,' Rupert told Vodopyanov, and he was tired now over the long and lucky (he decided) combination of their navigational scheming. 'You're quite good luck to us, Alexei,' he said in a good mood. 'It's much better that we're travelling on sea ice. It's flat and clean.'

Vodopyanov did not reply. He was asleep, and Rupert got wearily into his bedroll wondering now if there was any hope for them after all. He had not calculated yet how far the journey would be, but he must certainly haul Vodopyanov and the supplies at least 360 nautical miles, which in ninety days (he calculated sleepily) was four miles a day and every day, good or bad weather.

He winced at the impossibility of it, and he was wide awake again for a moment. But there was no other way, none at all, and he slept on the hard bed of possibilities—this long, long haul that might come off.

Chapter Nine

Their departure was difficult, which, to Rupert's superstitious nature, was not a good omen.

The sled was over eleven feet long, because Rupert had calculated on length helping him distribute Vodopyanov's weight, but at first the metal runners stuck to the ice and moved heavily. It was still dark in the early morning. With great difficulty he had strapped the bed on the framework of the sled and then dragged Vodopyanov onto it, dressed and in his bedroll. Their tempers were on edge by then, and Rupert's careful but secretive idea of how he could do it was going to clash with Vodopyanov's idea on sled travel—he was sure. He blew out the light and put it on one of the upright poles of the sled, and with the parachute harness over him and the very long nylon lines taut, Rupert began, donkey-like, to haul Vodopyanov and their supplies.

'Bon voyage,' Vodopyanov said, trying to cheer him up.

'Je m'en fou to that,' Royce said coldly. 'Don't push all the time with that ice-pick. Only when I need it.'

'Okay,' Vodopyanov said, trying only to tune himself to this concentrated Englishman, who would not laugh it off.

They were not on snow, but on finely ground ice. Its dry and crystal surface was excellent when it was hard and when it was built up on solid ice below, but when it went into the small patches of drift it was impossible to pull the sled at all, and Rupert had to unlatch himself from the parachute harness and come around the back and push and ease the sled through the soft patches.

They had not gone a hundred yards when this happened, and it would obviously go on happening indefinitely.

Vodopyanov had the long ice-pick with which he pushed as best he could, but he said nothing, knowing now that any suggestion to Rupert would be too discouraging. He struggled with the ice-pick and listened in anguish to the Englishman's effort to

move him. All round, in the light of the grey arctic day, was a flat and almost unbroken view of pale ice and white sastrugi, wind-blown and rubbed quite hard. The wind lifted the finely granulated ice over the million little ridges, over this seemingly unbroken pattern of desert ice.

'It will never do,' Vodopyanov said quietly to himself, watching Rupert bend double to pull him.

Royce turned around as if he had heard him. 'Are you all right?' he said. 'You're not shifting, are you?'

'No. Everything is good. Don't worry.'

Their clothes and bearded faces were already covered in white frost and drift, and Rupert got him out of another soft patch and went back to the harness and pulled him again for another hundred yards before the same thing happened.

They did not talk, they did not exchange lost words, and though Royce's intelligence had also told him that this would be hopeless, his other world beyond his intelligence would not surrender. It went far into the source of his strange principles and his definition of himself as a man, and it pressed him onwards over the ice; and in one fully lit day of four hours and well into the white night of pallid twilight and then full darkness he did achieve the minimum he had set himself—the four nautical miles. He believed it was so when he stopped.

'I'll have to go back to the fuselage,' he told Vodopyanov when he had pulled the bed off the sled and erected their parachute tent over it.

Vodopyanov was grateful only that the painful day had passed, and that one more long day of utter dependency was over. 'What for?' he said. 'What's the matter?'

Rupert sat down for a moment, very tired from the long haul and aching over his shoulders and raw legs. 'It's not the sled that makes it difficult in the soft patches,' he told the Russian, 'but me. I need skis.'

Vodopyanov did not argue. 'I thought of that,' he admitted, 'before we left. But what could I say? Where will you get skis?'

'Those channels I stripped off.'

'They're metal.'

'They'll do,' Rupert said and got up. 'I won't be long. But don't worry if I'm not back before morning. I may rest in the plane.'

Before leaving, he prepared the first hot meal of melted snow and the complex powder he had saved, and then, leaving Vodopyanov in his tent, began in the crystalline moonlight to return on his own faint tracks to the plane, which he could still see on the dark-blue horizon.

The remarkable silence and the white intemperance of the space around him were heavy. He felt so remote that again he had to extract his mind from it. But in this perfection of isolation he thought often of Jo, and he was more in love with his wife than he ever remembered being before. It could have been a delicate and warm and even passionate emotion if there had been some hope in it, if there had been any certainty of seeing her. It was not even sentimental; it was a very strong feeling of their affinity which made nothing else matter, not even his own life.

And because there was no future in it that he could count on, he did not stop himself thinking any more about some fatal end to this. Three hundred miles across the ice: forty, fifty, seventy days of this? It was remotely possible, but not at all probable.

Chapter Ten

Jo now believed that her husband was dead; but she could not yet live the life of him being dead. Was there no sign of him at all—no last impossible hope? The Americans had found no trace of anyone. But that did not prove his death. Nothing could ever prove it to her, she kept telling herself. Acceptance of his absence, of its time, of another month, of each day after each day was irrefutable. It was true, it was painfully true. Rupert was simply not coming back.

‘I will *not* mope,’ she told Rupert’s mother who had come from St. Germain-en-laye where she lived outside Paris among the pear orchards in an old but expensively rebuilt hunting-lodge.

She was being aggressive with his mother, who was small, lovely, transparent and naïve-looking in her 1960 finery, very neat and very alive in the world, but more puzzled and querulous than her fine hair and gentle eyes and expensive skin could really hide. She did not want to talk about Rupert. She did not want even to hear the idea of his death, or even hear his name, because she was also very superstitious, and she thought that if he were alive somewhere, to talk about him being dead would shatter him like glass. She had lately, after a lifetime of orthodoxy, become a Christian Scientist, and she thought (but she wasn’t sure) that in her new religion there must be no material place for evil, sin, disease or death; and though Rupert was her only son she was not yet aware that an end to him was really an end.

‘Never mind, Jo,’ she said gently. ‘I’ll stay with you a while. Then we’ll decide what to do.’

‘There is nothing to do,’ Jo replied sharply. ‘I’m not going to change anything, except that Rolland ought to know.’

‘Oh no!’

‘He *must* know,’ Joanna said. ‘He’s clever, and he’s got his eyes

and ears. I can't pretend any more that it's simply a delay. He sees me . . .

'Please don't say anything yet,' Mrs. Royce said.

Jo shrugged.

'What about Tess?' Mrs. Royce asked. 'She's the sharp one. Please be careful.'

'Tess knows everything, I know that; and I think Angelina helps her. But she's too young to really understand. Rolland isn't, though, and he'll feel it anyway. Oh, I don't know . . .'

Rolland was not so demonstrative. Who knew, at any time, what he was thinking and feeling? Jo certainly did not. He was like his father, odd theories already, and when he came in from school and threw his books behind the hall door and went into Angelina's kitchen, she was not sure that she would ever know much about him as a serious and occupied person. Sometimes she would kiss him and hug him in a passion of feeling, but at eleven (he had just had his birthday) this embarrassed him. Then sometimes he could come to her and sit or lean on her and ask for affection, which she would lavish on him and then put him to bed, looking at the calm face to see his father in it.

'Why isn't he coming?' Rolland asked. 'Is he really caught in the ice?'

'Exactly,' she said. 'The winter is very long, sweetheart, and very difficult. You ought to read about Nansen and Peary, then you'll understand.'

She had never read about Nansen and Peary herself, and because he was a very willing reader she went the next day to Charing Cross Road and bought him two volumes of Nansen and several old Peary books. She was going to give them to him, but she started reading them herself instead.

She was overwhelmed by Nansen, because that was so like Rupert: those serious blue eyes and high hard cheekbones, a lean face and pale blond hair. Was that Rupert Royce or was it Fridtjof Nansen? She was too impatient to read it all, but she read enough to argue, once more, that if Rupert had been dropped by parachute on the ice, then he always had a chance. What Nansen could do, Rupert Royce could also do in that same insistent, patient, dogged, egotistical fashion.

She sat before the fire of paving-blocks in the old wet house and

let it drift over her slowly, and her mother-in-law watched her sadly.

'You know, you needn't worry about money, Jo,' Mrs. Royce said. 'That's not what you're worrying about, is it?'

'Not at all,' Jo replied. 'I haven't even got that far yet.'

She would not say what she was really thinking. In any case she must not even think it. That was the situation now, and yet it suddenly meant a total loss. There had been no quick blow, there was no eruption of the sort Dr. Marian Crayford had expected, because it had been too slow and untraceable and undefined. He would *not* come back. But how it had changed! Once she had dared not give up hope; now she knew that she must not hope at all. It was too dangerous to hope now.

'I must go up to look at Rolland,' she said. 'I'll bet that little devil is reading when I told him not to.' She went up the back stairs quietly to catch him at it.

It was after ten o'clock, and it was cold on these stairs. Gas central-heating in the house cost so much to run that she had turned off the radiators here. But why was she saving money now? She shrugged at the stupidity of it. Why were all the details of her life so thoroughly stupid now, simply because Rupert was not here, or because he no longer existed? Her life was quite wasteful and meaningless. She could not get up in the morning any longer and face a normal day, and even with Tess there was a strange and heartless gap between them. In fact, instead of being drawn closer to her children she seemed to be losing the unthinking contact she had had with them. She needed Rupert—her life was too incomplete without him. She *needed* him!

'I'm thinking about him too much,' she warned herself and tried to shake off this depression. But she was also careless and beaten enough to let it go on, and she sat on the top of the cold stairs and thought about it.

But after a while it became too hopeless, too confused. 'I'm simply not all there,' she told herself firmly and wiped away her tears and got up quickly.

But the thought of her wastefulness persisted. She had done nothing but live a married life for twelve years. What else could she have done? Angelina had only been five years with them, only

after Tess had been born. Before that she had looked after Rolland and this house by herself, or with daily help. And even with Angelina here, it was all she could do. Why should she complain now? Why should she search for purpose or future? Should she, for instance, think of getting married again?

The thought of a substitute for Rupert was terrible and intolerable, and she felt like a traitor. She longed for Rupert to come back, to simplify all this with his return. She could not think of life without him. It was simply so.

Also Rolland was reading.

'I told you not to,' she said, whispering. She kept Tess in the same room because she was fond of her brother and would not sleep in a room alone. Tess was folded up in her own bed like a ball and Jo straightened her out and opened the window and felt the cold shaft of air reach her heart. 'Get down into the bed and cover up,' she said to Rolland.

He gave her the book he was reading to put away. It was one of Rupert's old private school books which he had saved, a heavy Victorian reader about the Greek wars—the simple but romantic view of the epic heroes.

'Would you leave the light on?' he asked her.

'All right. But you must sleep,' she said firmly.

His wide-open blue eyes looked at her without reply.

'What's the matter, sweetheart?' she asked, relenting and sitting down on the bed.

'Nothing,' he said. 'But if father doesn't come back, what will we do?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I just don't know yet.'

'Will I have to go out to work?' he asked.

She laughed when she could have wept. 'What gave you that idea? Of course not.'

'Dickens,' he said, from the store of his old-fashioned reading, 'had to go to work when his father went to jail.'

'But that was in Victorian England . . .' ('My God,' she thought. 'Rupert's weird education, and now Rolland himself is quite Victorian, despite that school.' *That* school was a small half-heartedly progressive school near Hampstead Heath which Rolland went to, although she had never really liked it. Let him go to an ordinary preparatory school, where there was nothing

odd). 'It's different now,' she told Rolland. 'All the conditions that caused children to work have changed.'

'I know,' he said calmly. 'Even so, what are we supposed to do now if we don't have a father?'

She could not reply, but she looked at him to see if he understood what he was saying. These wide eyes, untried and thoughtful, seemed to know. But if he did know, how could he be so calm when he had loved his father so deeply? She watched him, and he stared back at her with a soft and untrained grip on what had happened to his father. Would he never close those eyes again?

'I don't know darling,' she said. 'I don't know yet what we'll do.'

She kissed him and suddenly trusted him and knew she could share it out with him; and she pushed back his hair and smoothed his eyebrows which was an old habit of the adoration of his childish eyes and ears and nose. How beautiful all children were.

'Anyway, it's not going to be bearable,' she said impulsively, and in agony again. 'I can't even think about it yet. I'll never get used to being without him.'

'He won't come back?' the boy asked.

She shook her head. 'No,' she said, pronouncing him finally dead. 'Not now, sweetheart. Not any more.'

Chapter Eleven

The journey south and east over the ice was a journey for Rupert which ceased to mean anything human at all after a week, and after two weeks it became bestial and cruel. Each day on his crude skis he struggled with the sled, while Vodopyanov pushed with his ice-pick. They developed a good method which worked very well when it was flat, but when they reached some of the old ice, and the pressure ridges of huge ice cliffs which built up all round them, it became a hellish search for a route, for a way, for a path between them. Or if there was no route between the ridges they had to go over them—up, then carefully down if they were lucky. But too often they slipped, and they would tumble down a twenty-foot drop into soft snow, almost wrecking the sled, wrenching the bed out of place, and breaking Vodopyanov into a thousand painful fragments.

The weather had remained reasonable, but it began to worsen and Rupert was pulling Vodopyanov through a rising blizzard when he fell into a small crevice and almost broke his right leg. He struggled out of it and lay on the ice, exhausted but waiting for a moment to be sure that his leg was all right, barely able to see Vodopyanov in the driving, granulated ice.

‘All right?’ Vodopyanov shouted.

‘I think so,’ Rupert replied faintly. But his right leg was twisted, and it hurt at the knee. ‘If you break a leg now,’ he warned himself as he moved Vodopyanov back onto the sled, ‘if you even twist an ankle, you might as well blow your brains out.’

This was a dramatic possibility, but he was not being dramatic or even good-natured about it. Reality was always arriving in barer and barer forms, and it was stripped now of any means of hiding from it. He was so exposed to its obvious truth that he meant exactly what he said and was no longer shocked by it.

'We'll have to camp,' he shouted at Vodopyanov above the wind.

'Okay!' that deliberately cheerful voice replied.

He could now erect the small tent efficiently, even in the wind, which he did under the lee of a tall ice ridge, taking a chance on the drift covering them up. He was thirsty, and he lit the stove and boiled the snow and sipped the hot water and threw in one of their English complex powders and when they had eaten it, silently and tastelessly, he unrolled his bedroll which was already filled with snow and shook it out and got into it and slept without stirring, without thinking, without caring.

'How then, Rupert,' Vodopyanov said in one of his deliberate and grimly encouraging moods when they had been lying in their minute tent for two days, sealed in by the weather, 'if you are not a Christian and not a communist, what are you?'

They were waiting for a break in this white, roaring desert, and they were spasmodically discussing their hope, any hope, and where it came from. Why should they hope when circumstances proved their situation hopeless. Was there hope for a future? Could you create one by talking about it? They talked about their predicament without pain or deception, and now it had come to the point of realizing that even if their limit of endurance was ever reached, there would still be another one, and yet another limit still to be reached. Rupert's leg was bad, but he hid that from Vodopyanov; Vodopyanov's fever had returned but he tried to hide that from Royce. But they watched each other cunningly and argued on their fate, because it wasn't religion and it wasn't philosophy that kept them hoping now, so why should they look for one or the other?

'I'm not sure what I am,' Rupert told him, 'or rather—what I was. If we do come out of this, I suppose I will be quite different. Harsh experiences usually change a person considerably.'

'That's true. I will also be different,' Vodopyanov admitted and then he laughed. 'But it won't make me a good Christian. What do you think about Christ? Do people in your country still think he was a God? Do you believe in religion, Rupert?'

'I don't know,' Royce said offhandedly. 'I didn't have much

education in it. My father didn't care, and my mother was one of those people who allowed me to find my own way when I was a boy, so I used to go to a Protestant church in England, and a Catholic church in France. Once I thought about becoming an orthodox Jew, when I was eleven or twelve and read that it was the only true universal religion. But a few weeks later I discovered that there were plenty of other and older and simpler gods before the Hebrew one. So that was the end of that.'

'Yesterday's religions,' Vodopyanov said, 'are today's superstitions.'

'Perhaps, perhaps,' Rupert said sleepily, always surprised by Vodopyanov's apt comments. Lying in his bed he watched the wind pile a dark curtain of snow-drift up the side of the little tent, which he would soon have to go out to, reluctantly, and shift. 'But I suppose Christianity is still a religion, not a superstition. Although, as an adult, it always seemed immoral to me to think that a guilty person could be pardoned and even justified by putting to death an innocent and divine victim. Once I had read Frazer's *Golden Bough* I never recovered that innocent myth. Although the morals are still the ones we live by. Am I a Christian? I suppose I am . . .'

'It's lifting,' Vodopyanov said of the weather, which was usually more important to them here than the vital problems of their rival moral systems.

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They went on again in the shortening night, because the moon was out—brilliantly. It was a strange double-circled moon, surrounded by curtains of green and yellow light, and at its apex it became an enormous cross of incandescent light flooding the sky. The wind was low and the ice surface crisp and easy to travel on, but it was so slow and heart-breaking on the ice-hummocks that Rupert's daily haul was reduced sometimes to a mile and a half before he collapsed, exhausted by the anarchy of the ice and the traps of snow.

For Vodopyanov it was a purgatory, because the jolting of the sled, the sliding and slithering passage it made, the jerks and starts and crashes had made his body a battering-ram, so that now he could not even half-sit up any more, and he was feverish almost all of the time, and frozen to the thighs and in anguish

(above all) for this terrible strain on Royce, and—in its aim—for this quite hopeless journey they were making.

After a week of it they were layed up again for a day and a half while the weather blew a blind ice storm, and Rupert recovered some strength and bathed his sores and Vodopyanov dreamed painfully, faintly of home.

'I always wonder where my wife is and what she's doing,' he said with sudden dismay. 'She won't be in Moscow now. She'll be out in some of our northern stations, in some collective, some factory. She must be feeling very unhappy too. I think she must have given me up by now . . .'

'What does she do?' Rupert asked.

'She is a cultural worker. She goes everywhere giving talks on our poetry and English poetry, and she knows our far north as well as I do . . .'

Rupert laughed dryly. 'That's an odd occupation, isn't it?'

'You think so?' Vodopyanov didn't think so. 'She'll always read out her talks and her own poetry. She's very good to hear. Her English is very good too. She's also a party member. I think, these days, that I myself ought to apply. Some day I'll do it.'

'But aren't you all communists?' Rupert said, opening his legs to dry his sores.

Vodopyanov laughed. 'What are you saying! You mean real communists? No! No! It's not easy to become a communist, in our country, not easy at all. You must be worthy.'

Rupert asked then the question that had grazed his mind from time to time without finding satisfaction. 'What were you doing in the Arctic yourself, Alexei?'

Vodopyanov ignored it, deliberately or offhandedly or tiredly: it was hard to say. He said he was wondering, as he lay back in the darkness, what they were doing on Rudolph Island now. 'Ah, they will say, *Vodopyanov was careless and took too many risks. Poor Vodopyanov. What a pity!* But they didn't know about my friend Rupert. It will be a good joke when I turn up . . .'

Vodopyanov laughed in weak delight at the prospect. It was a good joke.

*

But there would be no more good jokes like that.

Their clothes stuck to them now, their beards had become solid

and greenish and black with sweat and grease, their hair was long and matted, and their eyes were beginning to suffer from the wind and the glare—this white frozen aspect of an undefined horizon.

A bird appeared, the first crawk of a Ross's gull with a pink breast and a black ring around its soft neck. Rupert tried to catch it as it settled casually on the sled, but it flew off each time, until he took out the gun and shot it so thoroughly that nothing was left. He was sorry, because they had expected to eat it.

'Next time,' he said savagely to Vodopyanov, 'I'll hit it with my ski.'

Vodopyanov was too exhausted and too frail now to reply, and Rupert's supply of discipline, of belief in this, was becoming too thin to depend on. Vodopyanov was only hanging on by habit, simply by the habit of being alive. For two days he had been almost unconscious, but he could not give in to dying, even though he was always on the rise and fall of it.

'How are your legs?' Rupert asked him gently, hazily.

Vodopyanov was lying in his bed in the shallow tent slowly regaining awareness, and he nodded and watched Rupert as he had that first day, when he had been only half-conscious of what was happening.

'I'm still bad luck,' he said slowly. 'No good to you at all.'

'You know, you can't say "bad luck" like that,' Rupert told him. 'It doesn't make sense. *You* can't be bad luck. The whole thing is bad luck.'

Vodopyanov nodded.

'I'm going out to take a meridian to see what latitude we're in,' he told Vodopyanov. 'That bird may mean we are nearer land than we think.'

The ice, too, was beginning to be wet. Two days of sledging through the first puddles had soaked Vodopyanov and Rupert to the skin, and now it was raining or slushing intermittently, with the sun breaking through a whitish-grey sky. What Rupert also wanted to do was to work out, secretly, a longitude so that he could know exactly where they were.

Rupert erected a shelter with the sled and a piece of parachute silk, and though his shoulders were raw and bleeding from four weeks of harness, though his right leg was stiff and rheumatic, he made meticulous preparations for shooting the sun when it

appeared, setting out his watch and the tables and the sextant and then waiting.

When it appeared in the afternoon he centred the eyepiece (it was a bubble sextant) in the sun's hot heart, and then he went into the tent and began to work it out with the tables.

'Seventy-six and four minutes latitude,' he said to Vodopyanov. 'We've gone very far south. We've been drifting even as we walked. These damnable sores,' he said, trying to unstick his trousers from the two bad sores which he had bound with a strip of silk, but the silk kept falling down. 'Tomorrow we must begin to go due east,' he said. 'We must be near land.'

Vodopyanov was not greatly interested, and Rupert knew he was talking to himself more often now. He went outside again because the stench in the small tent was unbearable, and he wanted to go on working out the longitude.

The falling slush had stopped. He moved away a little and began to work on the almanac and the logarithms; but his heart, his eyes and his sympathy with his own predicament were far away over the blue humps of ice. He longed now with a hungry heart to be at home with his children.

'Rupert!' Vodopyanov called from the low tent.

'Yes? What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' Vodopyanov said. 'I wondered if you were still there . . .'

'Of course I'm still here'

'You know, you could go very far without me now,' the weak voice told him. 'That's what you must do . . .'

Rupert did not reply but simply moved farther away with his paraphernalia, out of sight over a dry, high hummock of ice where he sat down to work out his calculation.

He shrugged at its figure. If that were true it was all very stupid. They were still a hundred miles from Patrick Island, and he knew he could not, with all the exaggerated determination he could muster, pull Vodopyanov another hundred miles. Thirty more days? He was far too weak, the skin of his shoulders was open and raw and festering from the harness, and the sores on his legs and inside his arms were so painful when he walked that he had to walk legs apart and arms apart, and he knew he was hardly good for four more miles.

Also, there was only enough of the emergency complex powders left for four more days.

He sat for a long time looking at the wet ice-field. The old ice was breaking up with startling explosions which he was used to by now, and the thin new ice was still forming. He watched over it and decided that he hated the ice as much as he hated death. He could not think clearly of anything except this blind hatred of his circumstances, the idiocy and the loss—the end to life when life had only been half-lived, half-consumed. It was a colossal and gross stupidity.

‘Rupert!’

‘Ah, damn you!’ he said to himself about Vodopyanov. ‘What is it now? If we’re going to die, then let us die!’ He did not move for a moment, hidden from the tent by a cliff of ice. But then he was aware that something was wrong. He thought he heard Vodopyanov’s muffled cries and he leapt up and splashed through the pools of water over the pressure ridge in the direct path to the tent.

He didn’t reach it. Below him and over the wreckage of the tent was a yellowish-white bear waving its long neck and standing over Vodopyanov like a cow over a calf, hissing and showing its teeth. Rupert could not see Vodopyanov under it, but he could see one fist clutching at the bear’s stomach fur, and it so amazed Rupert that he simply stood above it for a moment, fascinated. A dozen times in variation this had happened to Nansen and Peary and to all arctic explorers, and their experiences ran quite clearly through his mind.

Then he came to his senses and he picked up a lump of ice and hurled it down on the bear, which had already discovered him. It looked up, and he threw another lump and hit it on the snout which seemed to stir the long-necked beast a little so that it lifted itself, and very slowly and with its neck in a ridiculous posture, it backed away.

‘Go on!’ Rupert shouted. ‘Get out of the way.’

He hurled another ice clod, and it began to amble off, turning once to look up at Rupert who was leaping down from the hummock to the wreckage of the tent, unravelling the torn remnants of it from Vodopyanov, saying: ‘Are you all right, Alexei? Are you all right?’

'I'm okay,' Vodopyanov said faintly when his face had been uncovered. There were slashes on his face, but they weren't deep. 'Get that bear, Rupert. Shoot it.'

'My God, yes,' Rupert said, and he found the rifle on the sled and pulled it out of its canvas jacket and loaded it as he ran off over the ridge where the bear had gone.

Its enormous plantigrade tracks were clear, and Rupert was running in snow and slush, recklessly following the tracks over the snow, wondering how it could move so fast. He was plunging through a soft basin of snow, up to his waist in it and below a ridge, when he heard a coughing growl. When he looked up he saw the bear above, scratching with its back paws to get a good purchase so that it could leap down on him.

Rupert raised the rifle and fired. The kick of the rifle almost dislocated his shoulder because he had not packed it in, but he looked up again. The bear had not moved, nothing had happened. He lifted the gun and fired over the open sights into its muzzle and this time the bear roared and fell head over heels off the cliff and into the snow near him with a tremendous thud. It waited a moment (and Rupert also waited, fascinated and forgetful again) and then it bellowed and began to stumble off. Rupert struggled out of the slush after it, reloading the rifle and waiting again for a good shot. The bear was still too fast for him and it had disappeared around a high pressure ridge, so Rupert began to climb the ridge like a monkey until he was high enough up to see the bear.

He shot it again, and this time it went down. As he ran up to it to finish it off, it raised its head, and Rupert stopped suddenly and backed away. But it looked sadly at him once; he fired into the neck again, and it went down quite dead.

The bear meant a sudden renewal of life for a short time, and they ate the raw ribs which Rupert barely had strength to butcher properly. But then they wondered for a moment what was the matter with life. Rupert speculated about the beast itself, and what had brought it. 'Almost certainly the smell of human flesh,' he said to Vodopyanov, and though it was not a very fat bear after the long winter, it was a rich world for them after the mush and depletion of complex powders.

The tent seemed hardly repairable, but Rupert patiently sewed

as much as he could of the top, and they slept that night with a good temper, no dismay. But in the morning the situation had changed again. The floe they were on had split. Now, for the first time, there was a big open lead of water before them, with a coating of thin ice over it, too thin to carry them.

‘We’ll have to hurry up and get out of here,’ Rupert told Vodopyanov, who seemed better after the bear meat and a good sleep.

But the Russian could still not sit up and he nodded and said, ‘Okay. There’s no fun staying here, eh?’ He watched Rupert dismantling the tent.

It was a difficult decision to make, because they had to leave almost all the meat, and yet Rupert knew that if they waited any longer there would soon be more cracks in the ice. They would be isolated on a floe, and it would take too long to get off it. He packed some of the bear meat onto the sled and moved Vodopyanov onto it with great effort, and then he put the parachute harness around his waist instead of his shoulders, ready to start. He had to wait—he had to beg his body for the initial effort needed to begin; he closed his eyes and braced his tired legs, and then with his teeth and his whole body tensed he wrenched at the sled.

*

The following days broke him with bad weather and too much sludge.

There was, by now, only enough complex powder left for one whole day. But Rupert had shot a seal and he managed to capture it before it sank. They lay for two days on a floe eating it raw and drying out, and waiting.

For what?

They did not know. The floes cracked noisily under them, and the open-water leads were so frequent now that the water was often many miles long on either side of them, a barrier to anything but a boat. Rupert had no energy left to ferry them across the biggest lead, so he lay in his bag and slept for twenty-four hours, and he awakened with Vodopyanov looking at him patiently and with a deadly sort of curiosity.

‘All right, all right,’ he told the Russian. ‘We’ll get a move on somehow.’

How was he going to ferry the sled? He wrapped his sleeping-bag around the length of it, then tied the patched nylon tent around the whole bulk of it and pulled it to the water, saying: 'If this sinks, it can damn well sink!' But it floated with one end down, so he pulled it out on to the ice again. He had already inflated the little yellow rubber dinghy and untied the paddles, but he must now get Vodopyanov into it.

'I'll put it in the water and then drag you to it,' he told the Russian.

'Not the bed also?' Vodopyanov said.

'We'll have to leave that,' Rupert said.

The operation was painful and complicated, and Vodopyanov collapsed when he was finally in the boat and bundled up, sitting up. The Russian could not lie down, there was no room, and the pain of sitting up was so great that he fainted. Rupert closed his eyes against it and put the sled in the water and attached it to a rope on the dinghy, and then got in and sat on Vodopyanov's useless legs. With Vodopyanov sprawled unconscious over the back of the dinghy, he rowed across the open water to the other side of the ice, almost tipping them over when the sled jerked and came up on them with a bump.

It was two hundred yards of water, and on the other side he had to get the unconscious Vodopyanov out of the dinghy; but he could not move him. He had no more strength, and he pulled the whole combination along in the water for half a mile until he came to a shallow ledge. Then he took a chance and pulled the boat up onto the ice. He bent down and rolled Vodopyanov out of it, glad that he was still unconscious and unable to feel what must have been an excruciating experience for his shrunken legs, his white buttocks, his useless back, and his thin and emaciated and bearded face which simply lay under its cloud of unconsciousness like a hidden and mysterious ghost.

The Russian had ceased to be a person to Rupert now, he was a filthy black bundle, and Royce pushed and pulled and jerked him angrily onto the sled again and put the inflated boat on top of him and began again, staggering recklessly, to pull the sled over the wet ice.

But it was finally becoming too heavy for him.

He began to strip it, throwing away the little cooking-stove, the

paraffin, the bubble sextant and everything else he could dispose of except the tent and the sleeping-bag and remnants of seal and complex powder, and the rifle and cartridges. He had already abandoned his crude skis.

The power of continuation now was automatic, and when he was stopped by another open lead of water, he simply started it all over again: putting the boat in the water and tying the sleeping-bag onto the sled, covering it with the tent, and then with an exhaustive effort getting the unconscious Vodopyanov into the boat, head first or any way at all, almost tipping the lot over and only saving it by jumping into the water himself and hauling it free of the ice ledge, under which it got stuck.

‘You bastard!’ he wept at the world. ‘Oh, you bastard!’

He crossed another open-water lead and knew he could not continue to pull the sled. But he pulled Vodopyanov free and left him bundled on the ice. He was so exhausted now that he fell down and went to sleep, only awakening when it was briefly night and he was frozen to the ice. He got himself into his damp sleeping-bag and looked at Vodopyanov who was safe enough, and then he went to sleep again.

They could not give in yet, and though they were clearly going to die, there was still no sign of death on them.

In the daylight, Rupert ate some of the raw seal, and leaving all the rest, he began the laborious drag on the sled until they reached another big open stretch of water, so huge this time that he could not see across the other side because the other side lay under the morning or afternoon mist—he was not sure which it was any more.

‘One more!’ he said wearily. ‘Just one more.’

That was all. They were far beyond speech, and he mixed some of the last grains of complex powder and chocolate with dry snow and gave it to Vodopyanov who chewed it and spat it out. Rupert did not object or curse. He went looking for a pool of fresh rain-water on the ice, and when he found it he scooped it up, brackish but reasonable, and mixed it with the powder and gave it to Vodopyanov who nodded and got it down and then sank back, his eyes closed. That was the end of their emergency rations.

One more, he had said. There were three more in twenty-four hours. He saw a seal and shot at it and missed, and then when he

was weeping quietly and bitterly over his failure another one came up in the lead near him and he shot it and dived in after it. He held it savagely and somehow got it to the edge of the water, then he got it out and left it there, while he lay naked in his sleeping-bag and waited for his clothes to dry.

Their existence now was becoming second to second, breath to breath, and he awakened in hot, permanent daylight and lay still, eyes open, wondering when and how the end would come, not caring any more because he considered himself already dead.

Lying there, he looked for Vodopyanov, forgetting where he had left the Russian the day before. He was not worried that he could not see him. He could no longer remember the past days or the past events clearly. Was the Russian still with him? It was too tiring to contemplate, but he sat up to look around, and then he saw Vodopyanov out of his sleeping-bag, fifty yards from it on the very edge of the ice-floe.

What was he doing over there?

Rupert watched through a haze of no memory, striving to remember why Vodopyanov could be over there while he was here; and then he realized that Vodopyanov had dragged himself there, and was now on the very edge of the floe and would be into the water in a second.

‘Alexei!’ he shouted.

He was too late. The Russian had reached the edge and without any hesitation had pulled himself with his hands over the edge and was into the water.

Rupert could feel his heart pounding so hard that he cried out in pain as he got up and ran, staggering, down to the floe where Vodopyanov was still floating with his clothes billowing up around his head. He was already going down when Rupert leaned over to reach for his jacket. He tried to hang on, but he fell in himself, and when he came up Vodopyanov was out of reach.

‘Don’t! For God’s sake,’ he cried out to Vodopyanov.

Vodopyanov turned, startled, but Rupert had him again and would not let him go, although the Russian kept sinking now and he would have stayed under but for the small under-water ledge of ice which was surprisingly there.

Rupert pulled him right out, dragging him by the jacket and

not stopping to look or consult him until he was far up on the floe when he stopped and fell over, panting and blowing out his breath and looking at the Russian.

‘What did you do that for?’ he demanded indignantly. ‘What for?’

But he knew what for. That self-sacrificing urge had finally reached its deciding moment, and Vodopyanov had been on his way out in the expected drama—not of hot gallantry but of sad inevitability. One of them must survive.

They watched each other for a moment, two very emaciated men, filthy and wet, overgrown with matted hair and tangled beards, their lips cracked and swollen: wretched, sad, and above all—helpless; but their eyes would meet over the bitterness of their predicament, and Rupert could say angrily:

‘It’s no good without you now . . .’ He paused to catch up with his panting breath. ‘. . . so don’t do that again. I won’t be any good at all without you. You ought to understand that . . .’

‘There’s no hope for you,’ Vodopyanov said faintly, ‘if you go on dragging me.’

Rupert was still trying to calm his breathing. ‘If you give in then so must I,’ he shouted. ‘You’re the only thing that keeps me alive. Don’t you understand that? Can’t you understand it?’

If Vodopyanov did understand he did not show it, although who could distinguish the tears on his wet face? Were they for himself, for his pain and his tragedy, or were they for Royce and the force of that other life which he was exposing and torturing to the very last moment?

They went on, and Rupert did not know at first that they were on land. When he did realize the fact, it meant little to him because he didn’t know where they were. Was it Borden or Patrick Island? What possible difference could it make? They were all empty of life. He noted it and did not stop, except when the patches of bare earth along the shore made him go back on the ice. It was full and perpetual daylight now, and he could see the rising line of low black hills of the island, which he was skirting, pulling the sled across the soft watery slush of the land-locked edges, not caring any longer about the shaking

danger of the loose ice on the sea's edge, the unbending strain of the sled.

It was now quite unconscious and quite automatic—all things and all movement.

So it was when he heard a dog barking—it meant nothing at all. He no longer even knew clearly if Vodopyanov were alive or dead, but he went on.

Again he heard a yapping and crying of a dog, of several perhaps. He stopped, his eyes so full of glare and so blinded by dizziness and weakness that he was not sure where he was or what he had stopped for.

Again the sound reached him.

It also reached his intelligence, and it moved away a small corner of confusion, and he thought clearly for a second. He must fire his rifle. 'But,' his clever intellect said, 'if that *is* someone, they'll simply mistake a rifle shot for the ice cracking.' Yet his intelligence also argued: 'Fire it again and again.'

He had been carrying the gun over his shoulder, and he pulled it off and tried to fire it. It was empty. Where were the cartridges? He fumbled in his pocket but there were none. He went back to the sled and found under Vodopyanov's feet a box wrapped in a greasy cloth and he fitted the cartridges into the chamber and fired one after the other.

'That won't mean much, nevertheless,' he said aloud. 'I'll have to find out where they are.'

He thought and acted like a child, and he began to walk on. But he was suddenly pulled over backwards by the weight of the sled on his harness, which he had forgotten. He got up, dazed, and leaned forward and ground out the first few inches and pulled the sled on slowly towards the coast ice, back towards the island, towards that sound which must be dogs. Did arctic foxes bark? Did anything but dogs make such a strange and living sound as that?

'I suppose not,' he told himself.

He reached the land and pulled the sled up onto the ice, but he was stopped on the shore by gravel and sand. He was able to see something now, when he turned around, although his snow-blindness was too limiting to make it very distinct.

What was it? Was it one disinterested and casual bear which would kill him?

There were more. There were a dozen shapes and they were not on the island, but on the sea ice coming from where he had been. He turned around and pulled the sled again, and when it was clear that they were men, three men and dogs and a sled, he did not stop but pulled his own sled towards them. He stopped only when he heard them shouting at him and gesticulating.

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ he said to himself.

He stood still and waited, not sure that it was true, turning around to look at the ice, at the far-off horizon, at the island, at all things, and then to this party of men and dogs who were approaching.

Still unable to accept it he started to pull again, his head well down and his body bent. His first touch of bright hard light was a hand on one of his arms as he was gripped and stopped and held up, and voices poured in on him. He looked up, but he saw strange and almost emulsified faces.

‘Well,’ he said calmly. ‘I don’t think I could have gone much farther.’

He could see their faces and he knew they were Eskimos; but there was no shame in that, he told himself.

‘In any case,’ he said as they unlatched him and unburdened him, ‘I don’t think it matters much any more.’ But when they tried to get him onto their sled with excited and heated talk, he said: ‘No. I’m perfectly all right.’

But they knew better, and he was put on their sled and he sat there smiling slowly until they organized the other sled, the dogs, the reshifting of loads, their Eskimo arguments, their curiosity, and their incredulity which, with his own unbroken nerve, he understood perfectly.

‘Amazing,’ he said. But the rest of it was lost to him for ever.

PART TWO

Chapter Twelve

Rupert felt like a public freak, and he did not enjoy it at all. He resisted it so angrily that even Jo (in her joy at the miracle) was surprised.

'But you *did* do an heroic thing,' she insisted. They all insisted.

'No, I didn't,' he replied.

In the long run, he said, it had been wasteful and stupid and degrading, and he did not want to be reminded of it.

'Surely,' they said, 'you deliberately risked your life to save another man.'

'It was not deliberate at all,' he replied indignantly. 'I thought the plane would be back. I didn't know I would be left out there for months.'

But his experience had been too extraordinary and his rescue far too dramatic to be dismissed like that.

What had happened?

He had been picked up by the professional trappers and hunters employed by one of the Eskimo-owned arctic boats from Isaaksen, which still worked the north, and which were in fact forced to work farther and farther into the polar ice. They were seal hunting at the time.

They had taken him to the Melville Island station, where the R.A.F. had sent a plane to take him (and what was then left of Vodopyanov) to the American base at Thulc. At first, rescue had been so incredibly restoring that he had kept on his feet and joked very well about it; but as the interest in him increased, as the curiosity spread out, and as the heroic flights of drama caught him more and more unprepared, his body began to feel the pressure of his long haul. He had been unable to get out of bed at Thule, where the Americans had kept him and the very sick Vodopyanov

in an air-conditioned hospital hut. But it depressed him. Its asceptic and barren nakedness and whiteness were too much like the empty world he had just left, and despite their friendly and attentive and perfect nursing, he had asked to be sent home as quickly as possible.

All the rediscovery of being normal again made him very happy; the existence of other people, which came to him always with their sudden presence, was so warm and embracing that he allowed the nurses to read to him (from American magazines) the important world events he had missed during the seven months they had been lost on the ice. He was perfectly capable of reading them himself, but this, they said, was personal therapy, and those dry young American voices told him about the Rockefeller-Harriman duel for the Governorate of New York, read him lengthy comments on the extraordinary Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in Moscow, and reported politely but non-committally that Mr. Macmillan had been to Moscow and that a man named Castro had taken over Cuba.

'I didn't miss much, did I?' he said to them. 'It's still the same world, with the same problems.'

He had talked to Jo on the radio-telephone—their incomunicable voices drifting and wavering and cracking in metallic clangs across the world.

She said: 'But if you're all right, you must come home immediately!'

Wasn't it simple? What was he doing in this American hospital with a needle poised over him all day? Antibiotics? He tried to refuse them. Vitamins in hypodermics? These likewise. He'd be *all right*, he said, when he could get his legs working and his intestines untwisted. They laughed in their youthful, American, doctoring way; but he was serious and he told the R.A.F. man they had sent to him that he wanted to be flown home on the first plane and with no delay.

In Surrey they had put him in another hospital, at least until he could walk. But when Jo came down there with the miracle of it still in her purple eyes, she had been frightened by his appearance—her face and body taking it as a shock she had not expected. He knew her very well. He knew she would be expecting a perfectly normal Rupert Royce, the one she had last seen. He kissed

her and said he was going to come home immediately. He was all right. He just needed plenty of *cooked* food, if his stomach could take it, and a normal life.

The R.A.F. doctor and Jo tried to joke him out of it, but he became very serious and angry and refused to joke. He needed above all else to be in his own house in Hampstead, so that this long wait in that white, stupid solitude would end. He believed this anyway. After all, that had been their aim, the dream they had both lived on, and now he must reach it. Then—and only then—would the whole experience be over and done with.

The Air Ministry doctor was a small sharp man, sharp enough to catch a glimpse of the heart and the point to it, and he said: 'All right, you can go home, old boy. But you have to be treated, no matter where you are, or you'll lose your teeth, and quite possibly your ankles will never be normal, nor your stomach nor your chest . . .'

'That's all right,' Rupert said. 'Just let me end this whole stupid business, and I'll be as fit as a fiddle.'

They sent him home in an ambulance, and he managed to walk up the garden path. He knew about all those cameramen and reporters now, and he did not look at them nor talk to them. He still refused to recognize the drama, although the more reluctant he was, the more intense the fuss around him was becoming. He hadn't thought that out yet.

There were also his children to face.

After almost a year's absence from home he found that the children were wary of him. Rolland had grown and had changed and was shy and polite, and he did not show a glimmer of surprise or pleasure, although Rupert hoped a little sadly that he could detect the boy's secret world below the cautious restraint. Tess had also grown and she had forgotten him completely. But like her mother she was alive to him in a day, in an hour, in a hot second—as if nothing had happened. She would gladly accept him back.

'Are you,' she asked with her mother's open eyes fascinated by his thin face, 'honestly the same one I had before?' To Tess he had been dead and resurrected. That was the simplest and easiest explanation. But what was death or what was resurrection

when they were both outside her experience anyway, or not yet up to it?

But Rolland was contemptuous of that. 'Of course he's the same,' he said to her. 'Don't be such an idiot.'

They were very strong words from Rolland, and Tess wanted to argue.

'Now listen,' Rupert told them. 'Let's not argue about anything, particularly about me. Let's not talk about it, because it's all over. So that's all.'

That ought to be that, if his theory on children were correct.

Rupert went on trying hard to enjoy his homecoming, but there were several factors which prevented him. He was weaker than he pretended, and weaker than he liked to be—which was inexplicable to him. Why should he suddenly be so fragile? He had felt all right even in the hospital, even though he couldn't walk and had lost over forty-five pounds and his legs and body were very thin and seemed to be as taut as wire.

There was also the problem of his being a hero, which was not going to be easy to put off much longer. It had become a wonderful story for every newspaper in the country. It was an astonishing thing he had done—to have dropped out of a plane over the arctic ice; and then—with all the irony of some antique destiny—to have survived under such incredible conditions (how incredible they were no one really knew because he had told no one) when the rest of his companions in the plane had been killed when it crashed at Thule.

There was also something else to explain.

Who was this sick Russian, and what had he been doing in a plane over the 87th meridian? If the Russian plane had crashed on the polar ice six months ago, why hadn't the Russians mentioned it before? Were they secretly probing, at low level or at ice level, the defences of the northern American hemisphere? Was Vodopyanov a sort of Russian aeroplane spy on Bmews or Dewline or on any of the American secret activities in the far north?

Vodopyanov was still on the American base at Thule. The Russians had asked to have him back, had even offered to send a

plane there (to Thule!) to fetch him. But the Americans said that he was still too sick to move—even if they were stupid enough to allow a Russian plane to land in the heart of their defence system. The Russians didn't believe a word of it, and they were insisting angrily that Vodopyanov should be released. By what right did the Americans keep him?

A counsellor of the Soviet Embassy wanted to see Rupert about it, and at first Jo kept him away. But the bother around Vodopyanov grew so loud in the newspapers that Rupert began to worry about him, and Jo told him that the Russian wanted to see him.

'But I wouldn't let him come here,' she added. 'I don't want them here.'

'Why not?' he asked her incredulously.

'They're always so sinister. And what was he like anyway?'

'Who?'

'That Russian. You never talk about him,' she said as if he were deliberately keeping a secret.

This was at breakfast which he insisted on eating in the greenhouse fully dressed in his neat but very hang-dog clothes.

'Vodopyanov?' he said and laughed. 'Oh, Alexei was always worrying about doing the gallant thing . . .' But he realized that it was cruel out of context, and he said seriously: 'That's not really what I mean. Alexei was in pain all the time, and he never complained or . . .'

'Or what?'

'Or gave up hope,' he was going to say.

But they had both given up hope quite often, and it rushed in on him now, as it did a thousand times every day: those last weeks had been an animal-like existence, not a hero's existence. He had not yet told Jo anything about the experience, and she knew better than to ask. It would come out.

'But, oh my God,' she complained to herself 'He's being so close-mouthed about it that I don't suppose I'll ever hear what happened at all.'

The Americans and the R.A.F. had also asked him a great deal about the Russian plane and about Vodopyanov. It seemed astonishing that the two men had never talked about what they were doing in the Arctic; but in the circumstances it had not been important.

As for the Russian plane—he wasn't sure. The Americans were very anxious to find the wreckage and inspect it, but that was a slim hope on a drifting ice-floe which may have sunk by now. They had questioned him very closely. *Had there been any unusual equipment? Could he judge what the plane was doing up there?* He said he had thought about it at the time but by then he had already filled in the fuselage with snow. They obviously had had special equipment—the sight of that dead radio operator crouched over that jumble of tubes and wires always came to mind. *Was it armed?* No, it had not been armed. *Were there small radar screens?* He supposed there were four or five in a row. *And Vodopyanov?*

'Alexei,' Rupert told them, 'was probably a very good pilot and a good navigator as well. He certainly knew English navigational methods.'

Had he been willing to tell more about the man he had just saved in order to satisfy them? This new and momentary world, which the ginger-haired American intelligence officer had quietly and delicately restored, did not seem to be normal. He had decided to say no more. He had to think about this situation. There were many things about Vodopyanov he had to unravel for himself, and he sat in the garden in the sun, half-asleep but trying to restore himself to the deliberate man he had been.

The Russian counsellor came on a Saturday afternoon when Angelina had temperamentally walked out. Jo had lost her temper and fired her anyway for mixing breadcrumbs in the tomato sauce, which wasn't so bad in itself but Angelina had developed such a passion for breadcrumbs that she was keen to put them into anything. She put them on the ice-cream she bought illicitly for the children. 'Good for you!' she said devilishly, and sprinkled a large helping of cake crumbs over the ice-cream. The children were willing. But the breadcrumbs over the tomato sauce for the pasta had revolted Jo, and the row which had followed had covered everything: always the children first (she gave them too many sweets and chocolates), the dog (she stuffed it with catnip) and now the candles which she kept burning before the sacred heart on her bedroom wall frightened Jo into a panic

about fire. 'You can go!' Jo shouted at her. 'I'm just tired of you.'

'You're making too much fuss,' Angelina said. 'All time you make this fuss,' she said indignantly. 'What for?'

'You're a religious maniac with those candles,' Jo cried. 'You get out of my house . . .'

'Candles are better than no-candle religion,' Angelina replied.

The recriminations had been (as they always were) absolutely equal, as Jo's black hair and purple eyes had been flashing about like angry diamonds, but Angelina was too firmly planted to be burned by Jo's bad temper.

'You can go,' Jo cried again, 'and take all those bloody candles with you, and tell the nuns they ought to be ashamed . . .'

'Too much fuss,' Angelina repeated firmly as she went up the back stairs. 'I go.'

Rupert had listened offhandedly, always hoping that they both knew what they were doing; but he doubted it. 'Why didn't you just say "No more breadcrumbs"?' he said to Jo. 'Wouldn't that have been enough?'

'What do you think I've been saying for months?' Jo cried with exasperation. 'What do you think made me so mad?'

'You're not very good for each other,' Rupert decided. 'That's the trouble.'

'Oh, you're so right!' Jo said. 'But I've had enough. You always side with her. So why don't you persuade her to stay? Go ahead.'

'Not me,' he said, retreating.

But Jo knew his innocence in these conflicts. He would go behind her back and try to work it out. 'Ah, Angelina,' he would say in Italian. 'The Signora is plenty talk. But watch out in five minutes. She'll be very upset, and then you'll see she'll be very sorry. Why do you two fight all the time?'

They had both forgotten he was an invalid. He was not in an invalid mood himself when Jo slapped down the spaghetti without the sauce, cold on the plate, with a lump of butter on top and a terrible threat to Tess.

'If you complain once I'll put you to bed now in the middle of the day.'

‘But . . .’

‘Eat!’ Jo thundered. ‘Not a word out of you.’

The Russian counsellor had grey wavy hair, a cheerful face, and yet a very serious and concerned look as if this ought to be treated seriously and with concern. He was like a man walking on glass.

‘Mistah Royce,’ he said, shaking hands solemnly, but his eyes were curious and alive and amused (it ought to be fun and pleasure. Why not?) ‘I am Mayevsky, and this is Mr. Golovkin who will help if I fail. My English isn’t too good.’ Golovkin was small, sharp-chinned, sharp-eyed and very calm, but Mayevsky was already impatiently feeling his way. Was Rupert willing to laugh?

‘I don’t think you will fail,’ Rupert told him. ‘You speak wonderful English.’

What a relief! Mayevsky laughed happily, showing one or two gold teeth.

‘Mrs. Royce,’ he said, turning to Jo, still beaming happily. ‘Everybody in the world admires your husband. What a brave man.’

They had been walking up the stairs, and at the top Mayevsky stopped to admire one of the paintings which were something else Rupert had recovered from his liberal past. They were modern paintings by Grosz, Modigliani and Klee, all of them more or less impressionist or abstract. This was a small and fairly abstract square by Klee of a church in a village painted in pale latticed diamonds.

‘Very nice,’ Mayevsky said. ‘Very *interesting*.’

‘That’s a Klee,’ Jo told him. ‘I don’t suppose you like it, do you?’

‘German?’ Mayevsky asked.

‘Swiss, really,’ Rupert corrected.

‘Mmmmm!’ Mayevsky said. ‘Not very Swiss-looking.’

They had to laugh at him. He invited it. He had put them all in a good mood. Was it deliberate? Rupert was aware that he had met three red Russians in his life—Vodopyanov and these two—and two of them had made a serious business of laughter. He looked at Golovkin, who was looking back at him, and they

exchanged a careful and worldly glance as if they both knew what lay behind this frivolity.

They were given drinks ('Whisky!' they said) and chairs by Rupert who depended on his very polite and formal manner to carry it over. What did they really want?

'Anyway,' Mayevsky said suddenly, 'we came first of all to thank you, but only in a small way. We would like to thank you properly later on, if you will accept. Would you tell me all about your adventure? Please do.'

'Now?'

'Yes. I am here. I will listen.'

Rupert scratched up and down his bony nose. Where was his modesty? Or rather where were all his complex, self-effacing theories now? 'Oh, that would be too long and complicated,' he said quickly. 'You probably want to know about Vodopyanov and the others.'

'That's true,' Mayevsky admitted. 'We want to hear everything.'

'Vodopyanov was the only one alive when I got down there,' he told them. 'He was paralysed from the hips down.'

'How did you manage to keep him alive?'

'We lived in the fuselage all winter, and then we set out across the ice towards Patrick Island, where the seal hunters found us. Vodopyanov was very ill by then. He tried to drown himself once in order to save me. That's about all I know,' Rupert said. 'Except that he was in the American hospital getting good treatment when I left. He was still very bad.'

'When you say *very bad*, could he talk to you?'

'Of course he could. He wasn't that bad.'

'And he didn't complain?'

'About what?'

'About any treatment in that hospital.'

'Why should he? He was getting the best possible treatment.'

'That's good,' Mayevsky said, but his happy face was back to the concern of what he ought to be concerned for. 'Why do you think the Americans won't let him go?' Mayevsky asked.

'Because he's in no shape to be moved,' Rupert said.

'But they will not let us send anyone to see him. We have even offered to send a plane for him.'

'To Thule?' Rupert smiled. 'That's not likely, is it? That's their biggest arctic base.'

'All right. Then we have also offered to pay for the Americans to fly him home, or to Canada. Everything. All facilities. Why do they keep Vodopyanov? It's an international law of rescue that you don't keep someone . . .'

'But he's too ill,' Rupert insisted. 'I'm sure of that.'

Mayevsky shook his head. 'They will not even give us a full medical report on him. Nothing at all.'

Rupert shrugged now. This was a slice of the cold war. 'That's something I can't help you with,' he said.

Mayevsky persisted. 'Perhaps you can. You must know Vodopyanov very well after so many months.'

'Reasonably well.'

'Then, Mr. Rupert, you must know that he is anxious to go home. You would agree with that.'

'I think so. He's probably as anxious to get home as I was.'

'You think so! Would you be willing to say that?'

'To whom?'

'Oh, to the press. To everyone.'

'Why?' Rupert asked. 'What makes you worry so much about him? He's all right. The Americans are sure to send him to you when he's well enough.'

Mayevsky shook his head quickly. 'We think they may not. That's what we're worried about. That's why we would like you to say that he is anxious to go home, before there is any suggestion that he doesn't want to. They will keep him and say he doesn't want to leave.'

'Nonsense,' Rupert said. 'I don't believe it at all.'

Mayevsky cocked his head and was very serious. 'Ah, Mr. Rupert. You don't know how these things happen. May I ask you another question?'

Rupert waited.

'Was Vodopyanov's plane shot down?' Mayevsky asked.

Rupert was amazed. It had never occurred to him. Who would have shot it down? The Americans? Perhaps. But why hadn't they said so if they had shot it down? Why not a big scandal about that?

'I don't know,' he told Mayevsky. 'I didn't even think about that. I honestly don't know.'

'The plane was originally found by you on parallel 87, not so?' Mayevsky said, his eyes on Rupert now without a joke and without a thought of a joke.

'More or less.'

'That is at least three or four hundred miles away from Greenland. The Arctic is nobody's, Mr. Rupert. It is certainly not America's. They have no right to shoot down a plane inside the polar circle. All that area is very close to our country.'

Rupert thought about it and then decided it was not so. 'I don't think your plane had been shot down,' he said. 'I don't think that it's even likely.'

'You think it crashed by accident?'

Rupert had nothing to go on for sure, excepting the likelihood of a big American fuss if it had been shot down. Yet it *had* been a long way, hundreds of miles from Greenland. Would the Americans have preferred to hush it up? If their ordinary radar had detected the plane and sent up a fighter to intercept it, that was almost an act of war, hundreds of miles from a United States base. But Vodopyanov, surely, would also have said something about it, unless he also felt guilty and was not supposed to be there. This was possible, and he said to Mayevsky:

'Why didn't you announce six months ago that you had lost a plane in the Arctic? Everybody says that you did not even mention the loss of a plane.'

'But we never announce such things,' Mayevsky said. 'Not with our polar aviation anyway. Have you ever heard of our arctic planes crashing?'

'No, I don't suppose I have, but . . .'

'We think that is our business only, you see. We searched for it.'

'Then what was your plane doing on parallel 87?' Rupert asked.

'Geophysical researches,' Mayevsky said promptly. 'The same as you were, not so?'

'How do you know what we were doing, if I may ask?'

'It was in your magazine *The Aeroplane* what your plane was doing.'

Rupert got up and sat on the window-sill and looked down at the wild roses along the neighbour's trellis. How marvellous to see a green, rigid, leafy excess like an English rose creeper. These particular eyes had only just come to him—this sudden view of many casual tentacles of ordinary life, which meant a great deal to the feeling of being alive in a cultivated world. It was partly sentiment, partly true to the way he was used to living—all this lush greenery of England and the black skyline, chimney-pots, trees, television aerials and every aeroplane which blinked its friendly red and green eyes at soft black skies. He was feeling it again through his unsettled eyes and feeling, too, as if he were being asked to decide who was right and who was wrong in this curious situation between the world's most impersonal goliaths. Who was guilty and who was innocent? Normally there would have been no doubt that the Russians were guilty. But Vodopyanov was hardly a guilty man in the cold-war sense, and he did not want to say anything which would even suggest it. He did not want Vodopyanov to be held as a spy. Yet was Vodopyanov so innocent? Was it certain that the Russian had not been on a radar-probing flight of the American defences?

'Well, I don't know,' Rupert said, trying to be honest.

'You don't know what?' Mayevsky asked, ready to laugh again if Rupert so wished—just a little joke anyway.

Rupert simply did not know which particular side to fall on this time. He was certainly not a man to torture himself too long with a grinding choice and with subtle intellectual doubts. He must make up his mind. He must also think of Vodopyanov. *What is the only thing you want for Vodopyanov now?* he asked himself. Rupert thought of his own situation. He had asked only to be sent to England, to find in his own home the unbarren and real world which seemed to be the elegiac opposite to all that pain, and of all they had been suffering on that barren wasteland.

'I don't really know what Alexei was doing in the Arctic,' he said to Mayevsky. 'We never discussed it. But I suppose he had as much right to be there as I did, so the Americans ought to allow him to go home as soon as he is better. But they will. Don't worry.'

'Would you think, if he is so ill, it would be a good idea if his wife were allowed to see him?'

'Absolutely,' Rupert said. 'But you have to be fair, you know. You can't expect the Americans to let her into Thule.'

Mayevsky sighed. 'I suppose you're right.'

They had been sitting in armchairs—Rupert and Mayevsky; while Jo sat silently before Golovkin on a high golden Italian chair. Golovkin said nothing, and his eyes peered and wrinkled and smiled and watched while Jo inspected their clothes. Why, they were dressed like everyone else. Their trousers were exactly the same as Rupert's, and their white shirts were sticking out neatly from the sleeves of their jackets. Mayevsky had gold cuff-links and a gold watch. Were they specially dressed, specially conceived for this sort of thing? Obviously! Mayevsky might laugh, and this other one say nothing, but she knew they were clever men, specially trained for this subtle work.

They would have stayed (Jo was sure) for hours, but she heard Angelina coming down the back stairs with Tess. Tess was weeping. What now? She excused herself, and Mayevsky looked at Rupert's blond face and said almost seriously:

'It's a wonderful thing what men will endure, isn't it so?' He stood up. He became thoughtful. 'Day after day,' he said. 'Those terrible days of hunger and uncertainty, and terrible cold. You are not used to cold in your country.'

'We were not that hungry, except at the end,' Rupert corrected.

'You can't deceive me,' Mayevsky insisted. 'Very typical English modesty,' he added. 'But we know that we owe you a great deal. Our own *l'ar* experts have said that your journey, pulling Vodopyanov, must be thought of as a very remarkable journey in polar experiences.'

Rupert decided then not to make any more modest remarks, however truthful, because in this context they would only become immodest.

'Then we'll go,' Mayevsky said. And, promising that more would be heard, more said, more done, he asked again that Rupert see and say to a Russian correspondent what he had said about Vodopyanov. Rupert agreed, saying: 'Why not?'

They had arrived at the front door and the Russians were anxious to say goodbye to Jo, who was at the back door (the kitchen) arguing with Tess and Angelina. Rupert put his head in the kitchen door to tell her they were leaving. All three women

were in tears, but they had reached agreement. Tess was not going to lose Angelina. But there must be no more breadcrumbs in anything, no matter how invigorating they were. As a compromise, Angelina could keep her dangerous candles burning day and night. Jo was willing (she said) to risk the whole house burning down, but she wasn't going to face breadcrumbs again. She dried her tears and sniffed heartily and appeared normal, when she said: 'Goodbye, Mr. Mayevsky; goodbye, Mr. Golovkin,' adding calmly: 'You're not at all what I expected you to be.'

Mayevsky was serious and he took her hand and said solemnly: 'Nobody is ever what you expect, not so? Eh, Mr. Rupert?'

'That's true,' Rupert said and, as he opened the door for them, Mayevsky could not resist one more laugh at the joys of their differences.

Chapter Thirteen

After their visit Rupert became two kinds of hero: the western kind and the Russian kind, though the second one did not evolve immediately.

The English newspapers had been after him from the moment of his rescue, even trying to interview him by radio-telephone at Melville. At Thule the Americans and the R.A.F. had asked him to say nothing for the time being, but when he had arrived in Surrey the Air Ministry had already put out a statement saying exactly what he had done. The newspapermen had tried to get into the hospital, had tried to catch him on the way out, on the way home, and always while he had been at home. He had refused to see them, and the stories had become more and more fanciful and exaggerated. He had become more and more angry, although he knew in his heart it was his own fault.

Was it his modesty? his snobbery?

He thought at first it was a little of both. He was certainly not proud of his notoriety, but Jo was very pleased with every word written, and Rolland v. secretly enjoying it because he would bring home his school friends to see his father, who had not yet gone beyond the garden gate. He was still very weak.

Yet even now, no one knew the real story, not even Jo. He wondered why he was so reluctant, so determined never to say a word about it. It was not pride. It might have been a fear of vulgarizing. It might also be a genuine denial of its fantastic romance, which was what the newspaper report always made of it. *Romantic?* 'Never!' He insisted again and again that it had been a very unrewarding and unpleasant experience, and nothing could change the truth of that.

How could he be a genuine hero in this sort of confusion?

He decided that physical courage was easy if you were forced into it. But who were the true brave ones? The sailor who stayed

on his ship sinking in the Atlantic? The airman who performed incredible feats? Was it the soldier's discipline in the face of death? Not at all. The heroes were those who satisfied—under impossible conditions—a useful role, not so much for its physical challenge but in the performance of some genuine task. Captain Scott of the Antarctic was a failure, not a hero, yet Dr. Wilson the scientist with him had been a hero. So was Shackleton. Nansen on his sled journey over the northern ice for a real purpose, also. Alain Bombard riding his rubber dinghy alone across the Atlantic to prove that a man could survive on the sea without extras—a genuine hero. There must be a true purpose, otherwise it was an accident and you couldn't be heroic that way. In his own case it had been a colossal accident, even a mistake . . .

Under these rules he was definitely a man of passage and all their talk meant nothing to him at all because there was no particular value in what he had done, except (accidentally) Vodopyanov's life, so it didn't count for more than a mishap, and he refused to say anything about the details of what had happened.

In the meantime Vodopyanov was the unlucky subject of a diplomatic war.

The Americans were indignant that their motives should be questioned by the Russians. The Russians were angry enough to send a formal protest to Denmark, on whose territory he was being held in Greenland. They demanded his release. The Russian correspondents (four of them) had arrived unannounced one day, and Rupert had refused to say anything more—despite their pleas—than he had promised to say: that he was sure Vodopyanov wanted to go home, and that he was sure the Americans would let him go when he was fit enough.

Poor Vodopyanov.

Rupert was still too weak to go to work, and he was already impatient and irritable with his lack of capacity, his shaky nerve and muscle structure, but he became angry about their bickering over Vodopyanov. The Americans were now saying he needed long treatment, and the Russians were replying: 'Let him come home for it!'

'Something is wrong,' Rupert complained to Jo, 'when they

can quarrel about one broken man. What's the matter with them?"

"Oh, they fight about everything," Jo said. "Anyway, perhaps he doesn't want to go back home at all. Many of them don't . . ."

Rupert lost his temper. "Of course he wants to go home!" he said. "But that's not the point. Why can't the Russians wait until he's better?"

But when his own words were broadcast and printed by the Russians, they added more fuel to the fire because the Americans agreed with him. Yes, of course they would release Vodopyanov as soon as he was better, so what were the Russians getting worked up about?

"Then let us see him," the Russians insisted again.

"When we can shift him," the Americans replied once more.

The times were very cold. Nobody was going to give or take an inch, and Rupert was worrying about Vodopyanov. He decided then that he would try to talk to him on the radio-telephone, if it could be arranged.

He first asked permission of the Air Ministry—of his department administrator Phillips-Jones who was an efficient but not very likeable man. Rupert's strict rules made this sort of gesture necessary. He was still on sick leave, but Phillips-Jones said dryly that if he did talk to Vodopyanov, he should do it on his own responsibility; it must be nothing to do with the department. Rupert said he understood that, and he telephoned the American Embassy and spoke to the Air Attaché's section and asked if they could arrange the call to Thule, similar to the call they had arranged for Jo. He said he wanted to talk to Vodopyanov. "I don't know," a junior officer said.

"Certainly!" a senior officer told him later, and he waited a day until the radio contact had been made. The Air Attaché rang him and then switched the call through, and Rupert was talking at 5 o'clock in the afternoon to Vodopyanov in Thule. It was noon out there.

"Hello, Alexei," Rupert shouted. "How are you?"

"Is it you, Rupert?" Alexei replied. "Hello, hello. Are you okay? What's up? Where are you?"

Alexei's American accent was even more pronounced now.

"Listen," Rupert shouted. "How are you?"

"Okay—absolutely."

'Yes, yes. But I mean, are you out of bed or in bed?"

'What do you mean?"

'What-is-your-condition?" he articulated. 'Are you in bed?"

'Of course I'm in a bed. And it's almost upside down. It's a very complicated bed.' Alexei's laugh was heartily the same, even over this hollow system of unconnected sounds. 'My back is in white plaster, but I'm okay.'

'Do you still want to go home?"

That had to be repeated and Vodopyanov said. 'Of course I do! All the time. Certainly I want to go home, that's true. I think I'm all right. The doctors here are okay, okay! But . . .'

The rest was lost, and in the fading and the return of Vodopyanov's voice they exchanged pleasantries, a joke about food, and a sentimental reminder that they would soon meet again.

'When I get back I'll tell them what you did, you see,' Alexei said. 'I don't say anything here.'

If that was a dark hint it was lost in the instrument of their contact, but Rupert was worried when he put down the phone.

'He ought to go home,' he told Jo. 'That's certain. If the Americans can move him now they should let him go. I suppose I should try to do something about it.'

If Rupert had been a man less sure of his decisions he might have hesitated, but he immediately telephoned the American Ambassador. The Ambassador was in New York or Washington, but the counsellor who was acting for him agreed to see Rupert the next day.

'What are you going to say to him?' Jo asked as he dressed the next morning in his grey suit. Rupert was always a formal man for the formalities, but he was not very pleased about his appearance in this good suit, which had once fitted him very well. Now it hung loosely on him, and Jo laughed.

'I can't seem to put on weight,' he complained.

'But you haven't had time yet,' Jo pointed out. 'All those injections won't do it either. You have to eat more.'

Three times a week he was being injected with vitamins and glucose and other preparations. He still felt very fragile. Something else must be wrong with him, because he had no real

appetite. He was almost afraid of food. Jo, in despair, had ordered two dozen bottles of stout, which he was now drinking with his meals. Perhaps that would work, although so far it only made him feel sleepy in the late summer afternoons.

'I'll simply tell them to let Alexei go,' he said. 'They probably don't understand what he went through.'

Jo loved her husband when he was dressed properly in a blue shirt and light grey suit and black shoes. But she looked at him again. He was terribly thin and his body seemed hidden in his clothing. His face was not exactly haggard, but it was transparently pale, it was hard, it was blond, and it was very clear and sure of itself.

'Shouldn't I go with you in the taxi?' she suggested.

'What for?'

'You might fall over,' she said, 'and I would be there to pick you up.'

'Don't be silly,' he told her irritably.

He went formally to Grosvenor Square, where he had to sit in a small grey waiting-room, and he was finally shown into a grey and white diplomatic room with two drawings by Toulouse-Lautrec and several unheard-of American abstracts.

He had seen the paintings and now here was the man who was diplomatically normal, a well-dressed man with a friendly face, very used to receiving in this fashion, yet also very curious. Rupert knew that one of the reasons he had been asked here was because Mr. Alterton's 'curiosity about him was like everybody else's.'

'You don't seem to be in bad shape,' Alterton said. 'I expected a pretty grim sight.'

'Did you?' Rupert replied with determined disinterest.

What did the American really see after this remark? A young upper-class Englishman with a typical, maddening effacement which was both attractive and repulsive. It was certainly the manner of a gulf which would never be bridged by a common language or by a good diplomatic manner and a friendly face. Mr. Alterton felt the gap; but he was by habit so used to it in England that he shrugged it off. He had his own upper attitudes, his own strata of authority, even if they were not the same.

It was pleasant. They knew the worlds they were in, and

Rupert did not hurry. Alterton knew Rupert's uncle. Alterton's wife also knew (in the Anglo-American-French society of Paris) Rupert's mother, who had disappeared back to her hunting lodge two days after Rupert's safe return. She loved her son, but since he was now safe and sound she had instantly forgotten the whole experience, as if it were an everyday possibility with Rupert. She had packed up and gone.

'Is it true that she became a Christian Scientist?' Alterton asked him.

'I suppose so,' Rupert answered, cautious in case this might be a familiarity.

'What do you think made her do that?'

'I really couldn't say.' He had never asked himself anyway. 'She probably believes in reincarnation, or something like that.'

'You don't say . . .'

But there was a moment now for business, and Rupert said then that he had really come to talk about the Russian, Vodopyanov.

'The Russians are convinced that you want to keep him,' Rupert said frankly to Alterton, who nodded. 'Anyway,' Rupert went on, 'I've talked to him on the phone. He seems to be all right. So I thought it would be a good idea if you could get him to some other place, not Thule, where the Russians could pick him up.'

Since the motives and the man who spoke were unquestionable, there was no thought of Alterton being indignant.

'I don't know much about it,' he told Rupert, 'but I can pass on your suggestion.'

'He's had a very hard time,' Rupert went on. 'Perhaps you could also tell them that. It was comparatively easy for me, because I could walk, but it must have been hell for Vodopyanov, perhaps more than they realize.'

'In that case there are probably good reasons why they keep him,' Alterton said. 'Medical reasons anyway.'

'That's true,' Rupert sighed. 'The point is, though, that Vodopyanov must be anxious to get home quickly. That was the one thing that kept us going. I can't feel very happy myself until he's at least on the way.'

Alterton understood, but he shrugged. 'The Air Force don't

often get their hands on a Russian arctic pilot. They're probably reluctant . . .'

'I don't see any military point in keeping him,' Rupert interrupted. 'They can't keep him for ever, can they?'

Alterton sat on his empty and unburdened desk. He was pleasant, he understood, but it was not so easy. 'They would certainly like to know what he was doing up there, I can guess that much.'

'Alexei won't tell them,' Rupert said. 'It's most unlikely.'

'Ah well, it's a touchy business,' Alterton admitted, and said again that he would pass on Rupert's suggestion. 'The Russians always make such a fuss anyway.'

They talked about a model sailboat which Rupert had been inspecting. Alterton said he shared the boat, *Boom*, with his richer elder brother, and he said that he liked to go home in February for the Newport season, then race down to the Bahamas for the Governor's Cup. That was his vacation.

'That way,' he said, 'I duck some of the winter here.'

Rupert had once owned a boat but he had abandoned it with his wealth, and now he only read about them. 'All these twelve-metre boats are getting to look alike above water,' Rupert said. 'I suppose the difference is all underwater. Look at the failure of *Sceptre*.'

'That was all those blunt lines,' Alterton suggested.

Rupert agreed, and said look what a wonderful old boat *Vim* was.

'*Vim*'s not so old,' Alterton suggested indignantly, his white fingers on the very tip of the masthead of this perfect model. 'In fact *Boom* is about the same age.'

Rupert felt the edge of irritation and he looked closely at Alterton to see if he had really been hurt by this slight to his boat. But Alterton quickly showed that nothing could really hurt him. Wasn't that his job? He laughed. 'You're right,' he said. 'They're building these big boats all the time now. Money, money, money!' he sighed. 'There's such an awful lot of it about, you know.'

Rupert never liked to think about money, but he was leaving anyway. Alterton suggested a further social meeting. Of course. They would arrange it. But as Rupert left, he was not sure that he had made a strong enough point about Vodopyanov, although he supposed he had done all he could.

Chapter Fourteen

Vodopyanov was not released, and Rupert became very ill and forgot all about the Russian.

He awakened one night with kidney cramps and a fever and finally a pain in his intestines which was short but very powerful, and Jo sent Angelina over the back fences for Dr. Marian Crayford who returned, fully dressed.

'There's almost nothing I can do here,' she said to Jo when she had looked at Rupert who was bent up, knees to his chin, covered in sweat.

'Then we ought to get him to a hospital,' Jo said.

'No hospital,' Rupert cried.

'But you can't stay like that.' Jo was frightened by the sight of her normally disciplined husband in great pain.

'You ought to go, Rupert,' Dr. Crayford said. 'You may have something seriously wrong with your kidneys.'

'There's nothing wrong with my kidneys at all,' he groaned.

'We ought to cool you down anyway,' Dr. Crayford said and told Jo to get some tepid water and a face-cloth to sponge him. But when Jo was out of the room Marian Crayford sat down near him and said, 'You're a silly fool, you know, Rupert. You didn't come through that arctic experience completely unscathed, and you should have had a few more checks.'

'Don't *make* me ill,' he said, the sweat pouring off his face.

'Shush! I'm not making you ill. But who knows what really happened to your body?'

Rupert said painfully that he did not even want to know what it had done to his body because his body should be able to look after itself. It ought to be able to correct all temporary failures and to function properly, despite everything.

The pain was too great and Dr. Crayford said she would give him a mild pain-killer.

'Don't!' he argued. 'I'm beginning to hate drugs. And what good will they do anyway? They won't cure me.'

'That's true,' Marian Crayford admitted. 'The only real pain-killer is morphia, and I wouldn't give you that now. It would simply cover up the symptoms.'

Jo came back with a towel and basin and face-cloth. Now she was tender with him, and worried. They sponged him down and changed the sheets and gave him clean pyjamas, by which time the severe pain had gone, and he was left with a dull ache in his groin. He told Dr. Crayford to go home to bed, and Jo to do likewise. He was all right. He would sleep it off.

'Have it your own way,' Marian Crayford said, 'but I'm going to call that Air Ministry doctor in the morning myself.'

'Don't worry. I'll call him,' Jo told her.

Marian Crayford sighed and left them.

Joanna lay in her bed and kept herself awake, watching him suspiciously until she heard him slide gently into sleep. With a shrug of nervous relief she turned over and was asleep almost instantly herself.

*

The legacy was long: X-rays of his kidneys and stomach, and many blood tests. There was nothing detectably wrong, yet he always had a little fever, a little pain. It upset him and weakened him again because he had been impatient to go back to work—to stop this wasteful wait for the body to restore itself while the mind raced on. The Air Ministry doctor, who was the crisp and yet casual man in league with all dissent, and whose empirical and materialist theories were close to Rupert's own (why else had he allowed Rupert to come home so early?) patted him on the shoulder and said:

'It'll straighten itself out in time. You let us worry about it.'

Jo had put up with enough. 'What's the good of that?' she cried. 'It's *he* who has the pain, it's *he* who can't eat or walk. Let *you* worry about it? That sounds so colossally silly, coming from a doctor.'

Dr. Ivory was firm. 'There's nothing wrong with him,' he insisted. 'He'd better be given some antibiotics just in case, but . . .'

'No antibiotics,' Rupert said.

'Why not?' Joanna demanded.

Who knew, Rupert said, what damage those drugs did—of a secondary nature? They probably killed off the kind of bacillus the body needed, as well as those it didn't.

'You'll kill yourself with that theory,' Jo said indignantly.

'Man is a backward animal,' he told them, pale and weak. 'We're still so primitive that we can't see what it is we're up against when we're sick. It's not really the body. In fact we've endowed the body with more real importance than it deserves.'

'You mean it's all in the mind?' Dr. Ivory suggested happily.

'Not at all. But the body seems to take the punishment for everything else. And the more sophisticated we become, the greater this gap between mind and body. We should always be in one piece, like most peasants are.'

Jo knew instantly where this would lead, and she begged him not to be stubborn and refuse drugs. The doctor laughed at these somatic theories, although he said he agreed with them in part, because he liked to hear theories which were no theories at all.

'Even so, a bit of streptomycin won't hurt,' he said.

When Rupert resisted the drugs again, Jo was so angry with him that she left the room saying, 'I don't even want to hear it. I won't be here to put up with it.'

Dr. Ivory was delighted and said, 'There's a girl for you!' and he left written instructions for the weekly nurse to inject him with the necessary drugs.

When Jo came back Rupert was still feeling philosophical, and he told her that man ought to live in a quite different way.

'Every man up to his eyes in work,' she said cynically.

'Why not?' he went on. 'Work ought to be worth while, then it's no longer work.'

'Don't dream,' she said affectionately, appealingly.

'Why do you call it a dream? We live in a terribly narrow world, very isolated, don't you think, Jo?'

'You're always looking for another world which you want to belong to. Any world but your own.'

'You think so?' he asked submissively.

'When you're sick you do. But you ought to know that you can't make your own world. That's impossible.'

‘Why not?’

‘It’s just impossible. You live in a world that’s already made.’

‘It’s not good enough,’ he said firmly, taking the soup bowl which Angelina had brought him. He held it in his hands to sip it. He pulled a face and put it down again. ‘That needs pepper,’ he said.

‘You want all that pain to come back?’ Jo demanded indignant.

‘No, no,’ he said submissively again. ‘And anyway, it’s not the pain in my body you have to worry about. It’s *me*. Something’s wrong with me, Jo. That’s all I’m trying to say. But no doubt it will straighten itself out, as Ivory says.’

He did as she insisted. He drank the cool soup with a spoon, and not direct from the bowl like a savage beast.

Chapter Fifteen

He was still in his low condition when the Americans announced that Vodopyanov had been shifted from their Thule base to another hospital in the United States. Again the Russians un-hinged their colossal indignation, tirelessly and repetitiously demanding that their pilot be returned to them.

Rupert was not very surprised when, on a Sunday morning at 6.30, Mrs. Nina Vodopyanov telephoned from Moscow to ask his help.

‘Hello, Mistah Rupert Royce,’ she said.

It was Jo (startled as she had been in those months of Rupert’s absence—always expecting terrible news by telephone) who answered. She said that it was not Mr. Rupert Royce at all, and that Mr. Royce was still asleep. Who was calling him at this ungodly hour anyway? When that static but clear Russian voice said in English that it was Nina Vodopyanov in Moscow, there was a moment when Jo remembered a little of the real pain she had suffered herself, waiting for Rupert to come home. When Nina Vodopyanov said that she had telephoned to ask ‘Mistah Rupert Royce’ to extricate her husband from the Americans, Jo’s normal antagonism melted. She told Nina Vodopyanov to ring back in four hours’ time. But Rupert came out into the hall to see what it was about.

‘It’s that Russian’s wife, all the way from Moscow,’ Jo whispered to him. ‘I told her you were asleep, so go back to bed.’

‘Never mind,’ Rupert said.

‘But look at the time.’

‘It’s probably mid-morning in Moscow,’ he told her and took the phone.

‘It’s not mid-morning here,’ Jo said and pushed a chair under him. ‘She should have thought of that.’

Nina Vodopyanov was so far away that Rupert heard her voice with the same lack of feeling he had always experienced on a Navy ship when a bulkhead Tannoy voice had given him metallic orders. She was calling, she said, to ask him why he had allowed the Americans to keep her husband a prisoner. Why, when he had done such a noble thing, did he allow them to capture and kidnap an innocent man who had already suffered enough? Did they have no heart, no human feeling at all? Did he not care what happened?

Rupert did not interrupt. Her angry voice disappeared and returned. Her good intentions about good manners also disappeared, and she became angrier and (he supposed) tearful.

'Surely your own responsibility didn't end when the Americans took him,' she cried. 'Your own conscience must tell you that, Mister Royce.'

But Rupert became angry when she talked about his responsibility. And how dare she make demands on his conscience, when his conscience above all could be satisfied that he had done everything he could for Vodopyanov?

'I already spoke to the Americans about your husband,' he shouted angrily into the instrument. 'I can't do more than that.'

'When did you speak? What did you say?'

'I told them they ought to let him go home,' he said.

He had to repeat this several times, and if she eventually understood it she did not say so but began again to demand that his conscience listen and that his heart stir.

'It's no good appealing to my conscience,' he shouted again, 'because my conscience is perfectly clear about your husband. You can't expect me to do much more,' he said.

But the moment he said it he knew he was being self-righteous about it, which was not at all how he felt. He was worried about Vodopyanov and he had never been quite free from a feeling of responsibility for him; but he thought it very unfair of this strange woman to attack his conscience like that. He could easily have said in reply: *'Didn't I drag your husband halfway across the Arctic to keep him alive in the first place? What right have you to demand anything more of my conscience?'*

But he was too drained of emotional energy to begin that sort

of contest, and he simply shouted that he would try again, he would do what he could.

'Then I can depend on you, Mister Royce, not so?'

'Depend on me for what?' he repeated hazily. 'Oh, all right. Yes, I suppose you can,' he said, and he put down the receiver as she thanked him very much.

'Depend on you for what?' Jo also asked suspiciously. 'What can you do?'

'I don't really know,' he admitted as he went back to bed, while Jo went grumbling downstairs to let Fidge the spaniel out of the kitchen, because she had heard them upstairs and was scratching and whining to be set free.

*

He decided to try the Americans again, but Alterton at the American Embassy said he could not help any further; it was now a U.S. Security matter.

Rupert then rang one of his Royal Navy and family friends who was an Under-Secretary of State, but he was told that the Americans were not likely to let the Russian go, not until the Russians persuaded the Chinese to release four American airmen they had arrested years ago and tried as spies.

'But you can't bargain with a sick man like that,' Rupert said irritably. 'It's hardly decent in Vodopyanov's case.'

'Listen, Rupert,' his friend said. 'Absolutely everything is fair and square on this level. So don't expect the Americans to be tender-hearted in a cold war, when nobody else is. Don't be so bloody removed.'

He exhausted his other important friends, some of whom said they would try to do something but did not. He even persuaded his uncle (whom he considered light-minded) to ask a question in the House about it from the Government's own benches, but the question was so innocuous and the reply so easily evasive (it was clearly a matter for the Americans, and was nothing to do with the British Government) that nothing was likely to be done on that level.

'It's becoming ridiculous,' he said to Jo. She had watched all this activity with a mixture of feminine understanding for Nina Vodopyanov, and also with a strange hostility which she could not really explain to herself. 'They're all idiots,' he said, 'and so

am I for expecting them even to listen. Obviously they only listen when you make a fuss, and I suppose that's what I'll have to do.'

'What do you mean?' she said.

'I mean make a big fuss of it.'

'But what if he really *is* guilty?'

'Guilty of what?' Rupert said indignantly.

'I don't know. But you're not in any fit state to start making a fuss about anything, so you ought to be careful.'

Rupert said he was fit enough, although he was now in dispute with the Ministry, because they had stopped his full pay three months after his disappearance. He had since insisted on full recompense for the whole period, even though the normal six months' permitted absence on full pay was up. They now wanted to pay him only half his salary, but he wasn't going to let them cheat him like that. When the welfare officer came to see him he was sympathetic to Rupert but said sadly that the rules were the rules. After all, Rupert had not strictly speaking incurred his injuries and ill-health in the real course of his duties.

'That's not how I see it,' Rupert argued, and he telephoned Dr. Ivory and said that the Ministry were trying to cheat on his pay. Could he do something about it?

Dr. Ivory thought it funny. 'For a man as rich as you are, you certainly want your bloody pound of flesh, don't you?' he said to Rupert.

Not many people knew that Rupert had turned over his wealth to his mother, but that was no argument here. Rupert knew the mechanical minds of those small autocrats of the paymaster's office (an embodiment which depended on him never actually seeing the clerks), and though his own superior, Phillips-Jones, was of no help, he was not going to give in to them.

'Okay,' Dr. Ivory said. 'I'll go and argue with them.'

A hero on half-pay, and Joanna was already saying: 'I can't run this house on £15 a week—not with laundry and that damned gas hot-water system and Angelina and the children. I can't do it, Rupert.' How would she run it on £7 a week? He was determined not to touch his deposit account which stood at £3,875; and now additionally he must make a fuss about Vodopyanov.

'But how will you do it?' Joanna asked.

'I'll tell the newspapers,' he said, knowing that this would be a breach of the conditions of his employment laid down by the Ministry, which said that no communication of any sort could be given to the press without the express permission of the head of the section or the Public Relations Officer concerned. But he knew what would happen if he tried to consult Phillips-Jones. He could spare himself that unpleasant experience.

Chapter Sixteen

Rupert wanted to publicize Vodopyanov's predicament, but in the result he only succeeded in publicizing himself.

'Arctic hero breaks arctic silence,' the newspapers said happily, and reported what they had finally managed to get out of him about the whole experience. His comments on Vodopyanov became an unimportant postscript to their stories of this pale, hard-boned, rich Englishman who lived romantically in a condition of modest effacement and blue-eyed restraint.

Had he been afraid? Had the journey (from which he was still obviously recovering) been as excruciating as it was supposed to be? Had they starved? Had they ever been tempted to cannibalism? Had the Russian stood up to it?

He had answered their questions politely, while insisting that he had really asked them here to tell them about the Russian. He wanted to make it clear that in his opinion Alexei Vodopyanov had not been spying, and that the Americans should release him instantly, and that in all fairness to the sick man he should be sent home.

Perhaps he should have known the result. But he was surprised and disappointed when he opened his newspapers the next day and saw flattering stories about himself, and very little about Vodopyanov. He might have guessed the result that if he was going to be opportunist in using the reporters, they were going to be ruthless with him, having seen through him. They wanted his story, not Vodopyanov's.

But when his own story was already dead with one printing, an afternoon paper sent a reporter for a follow-up story which was not quite so dead. Why had he made those remarks about the Russian pilot? What was behind it? Had the Russians approached him, for instance?

'Yes, of course they did,' he said.

Ah! So he was doing this because the Russians had asked him to?
‘Not at all,’ he replied. ‘I don’t care what the Russians want, it’s really what I want.’

Had he already approached the Americans?

‘Of course,’ he said.

Didn’t he believe that Vodopyanov was too ill to be shipped back?

‘They flew him out of their Thule base,’ he said, ‘so I suppose they can also fly him to Russia if they want to. The Russians have offered to send a plane for him.’

But why should the Americans give him up? After all, he’s a Russian pilot and his plane was flying near the American Arctic, probably spying.

‘I don’t think he was spying,’ Rupert said to this rather sly and full-voiced reporter who was heartily in sympathy with Royce but who was also dedicated to decimating his arguments. His questions were hard, and Rupert resented them, which gave them a good flavour.

*

‘But look at that,’ he groaned indignantly when he saw the evening papers. The headline said: *North Pole Royce admits contact with Russians over Red he rescued.* ‘Why on earth do they call me North Pole Royce?’

Joanna was pleased. ‘North Pole Royce sounds wonderful,’ she said.

‘Don’t you be silly as well,’ he said. ‘They’ve missed the point.’

The American reporters now found him, and though they were friendly, they too made their point. *Royce claims acting on own initiative*, the Paris edition of a New York paper reported the next day. This hurt, because it really suggested that he might have needed someone else’s initiative to tell him what to do.

‘Damn the whole turgid mess,’ he decided, and pushed the newspapers off his lap and walked out into the garden which was autumnal and dry, dying off slowly with the old year which was almost over and done with. ‘And good riddance to it too,’ he was thinking. ‘It’s been a rotten year for me.’

Jo followed him and put a warm, teasing arm around his neck and said, ‘Don’t be so touchy. You know you’re still very weak. You shouldn’t have been so sure of yourself when you set out to rescue this Russian.’

‘It was much easier getting him off the ice,’ he said.

‘Well, at least you did get him off the ice,’ she told him.

But he knew that she did not really understand why he must make sure that Alexei also reached home.

The Americans did not take any notice of him. They did nothing new about Vodopyanov. But the Russians, aware of his effort to get Vodopyanov released, told him that they wanted to make him a Hero of the Soviet Union for his part in rescuing their Russian pilot.

‘A what?’ he said to Mayevsky who had come specially to see him, his Russian face very excited.

‘A Hero of the Soviet Union,’ Mayevsky said and shook his hand. ‘And you will accept. But you must accept. I don’t think we have ever given this to any foreigner in peace-time before, only to Soviet citizens.’

‘How on earth can *I* be a Hero of the Soviet Union?’ Rupert asked.

‘I don’t know, but I hope you accept,’ Mayevsky repeated.

It had already been suggested by some of his friends that Rupert should be nominated for a British award, but he had refused it so forcefully and angrily that the idea had been quickly dropped. It was (he was sure) not inverted snobbery either. He didn’t want medals for that sort of bravery. He already had several from the war which meant nothing to him now. If someone had nominated him for a Polar Medal he would have been very happy about it, because that would have been for a valuable contribution to real work in polar regions. But that was something he could hardly claim for his voyage with Vodopyanov.

To be a Hero of the Soviet Union was not quite the same thing, and he had a tendency to laugh.

‘That’s rather funny,’ he said to Mayevsky who did not think it funny at all, so that Rupert became instantly polite and apologetic.

‘It’s very serious,’ Mayevsky insisted, closing off his smile.

‘I’m sure it is. I’m sorry.’

‘Furthermore,’ Mayevsky went on, ‘we invite you to visit our country whenever you wish as our guest: you and your whole family. Will you accept? Please do.’

Rupert was trying not to be cynical about this either; but he was feeling put out about something. Perhaps it was his failure to make any impression on anyone about Vodopyanov. This resentment did not go very deep (he was sure of that) but it went deep enough for him to want to accept something from the Russians which he had refused from his own friends, although he thought it just as valueless.

‘Oaky,’ he said. ‘I’ll accept your medal.’

He was astonished then to see Mayevsky’s eyes fill with tears. Mayevsky seized him and embraced him and kissed him on both cheeks and said: ‘Dear friend! Russians are very proud of you.’

Rupert blushed and realized that what he had accepted as a dry little trick against the stupidity of his own side was not going to be treated so lightly by the Russians themselves.

Rupert’s non-conformism was exaggerated a little by his strange gesture, and he was even admired by some for his determination to go his own way—mostly by the young men he disliked and mistrusted. Although perhaps a rich man from a rich family (an eccentric anyway) could do what he liked within limits, and Rupert was well within the orthodox limit, even though it was widely reported that he had accepted this Russian decoration with Foreign Office permission while refusing one from his own country. A hero had that much right to be cantankerous; and anyway, there were no real politics involved. He was hardly a communist or even a socialist. On the contrary . . .

The only serious drawback for Rupert was Phillips-Jones’s anger, as his superior in the Ministry. He accused Rupert of breach of faith, and said that Rupert *must* have known he was breaking service and security rules by all this public talk about the Russian pilot.

‘Not at all,’ Rupert said firmly. ‘I’m not giving out any secrets. I was only talking about Vodopyanov. And if you won’t pay me for that whole episode, full pay, then I’m perfectly entitled to consider it a private venture and say what I like about it.’

‘That is quite specious,’ Phillips-Jones insisted.

They were arguing in Phillips-Jones’s blue-and-white room at Kingsway and Rupert was asking to be shifted temporarily to

the office of another department where he could work in London, instead of at Bromley, while he recovered his health. He could finally start work on his notes and his complex readings. He surely didn't need to ask Phillips-Jones's permission for that, but he threw it in as a gesture of goodwill.

'I'm not sure that it's possible,' Phillips-Jones said stiffly.

It was bad luck about Phillips-Jones, who was a decent fellow, but he was a career departmental man, and he obviously resented Rupert's free and reckless and outside-sort-of character within the department. Rupert himself felt that he strictly obeyed the rules and never sought privileges. But it was the fear that he *might*, or that he *could* (as he seemed to be doing now) which made Phillips-Jones angry, and determined to impose the full weight of his disapproval on Rupert.

Rupert was impatient to get back to some kind of work, and he telephoned his friend Arthur Wanscome who was the Deputy Director and told him what he wanted and asked if he could be given a temporary office in some other department, preferably in the small geophysical section which he knew had an office in London quite outside his own special polar section.

'Why not?' Wanscome said, and Rupert (with his kidneys accepting the *status quo*) was set up in a small office off the Embankment with four young women (who were coding information for computers) and copies of his instrument readings, his notes and comments, and the bits and pieces of his own diary which someone had rescued from the crashed plane at Thule.

It was in this office that a worried young American from the Central Intelligence Agency found him and asked him, on the day he moved in, if they could go for a walk in the Embankment Gardens: 'Just for a chat.'

'Why?' Rupert asked. 'Can't we chat in here?'

Rupert had already been told, by two of his many friends and a cousin and a second cousin who was now a vice-admiral, that the Americans had been asking about him since he had taken up that Russian business. The Russians had made a big thing of it also, they had sent him interviewers and correspondents, and he now enjoyed talking to them as a small act of rubbing salt into the wound (he hoped) of those who had ignored him.

But now the final result was before him—a solemn young

American with very clear eyes and a strange manner. What was it? Was it a manner of secrets, of certainty, of confidence, of money and good schooling? No, Rupert decided looking at him, it was the manner of a worried missionary: a cheerful open face hidden desperately under a powerful and most important but self-conscious expression. Rupert felt sorry for him, and rather friendly.

'Oh, all right,' Rupert said. 'But just hang on a bit while I put all these magazines in the waste basket before they clear it out. The man who had this office before me must have been a Hifi crank. Look at this: *Hifi News*, *Hifi Weekly*, *Hifi News Letter*, *Electronics* and *Radio World*. Do you understand any of this stuff?' he asked the American who had not given his name but whose arrival had been announced by a telephone call from Phillips-Jones.

'Not much,' the young American said reluctantly.

'What's your name?' Rupert asked him.

'Oleg Hansen.'

'Oleg? That's a Russian name, isn't it? And Hansen is Scandinavian. How did you manage that combination?'

'I come from Seattle.'

'Ahhh!' Rupert said knowingly. 'So you come from Seattle.'

'That's right.'

Rupert wore a sports jacket and no hat, but sometimes he carried an umbrella which he now picked up and pointed to the door and said: 'Let's go.'

On the way, in the crowded street, Hansen said nothing, while Rupert chatted about the Pacific salmon which (he had read) the Russians were now introducing into the north Atlantic, which would be a fascinating experiment if it succeeded. Was he teasing the worried young Mr. Hansen? Rupert had an idea that Hansen had been trained to talk only in parks and gardens, and he was not going to say a word until they actually reached that safe, open ground.

'Here we are,' Rupert said when they had reached the little Embankment park. 'You can talk here. Now: what did you want to say to me?'

'I didn't actually want to say anything,' Hansen said calmly but respectfully. 'I simply wanted to ask you a few questions, if I may.'

‘Go ahead. Anything you like.’

‘We would only like to know, Mr. Royce, what your real intentions were in trying to make such an issue of this Russian pilot?’

‘Who would like to know?’ Rupert asked.

‘Didn’t Mr. Phillips-Jones explain to you my position?’

‘Yes. He said you were an American Intelligence officer. Is that who wants to know—American Intelligence?’

‘Well, you might say the interested security agencies in the United States.’

‘Of course. Well, it’s very simple. I think Alexei Vodopyanov should be sent home. Why do you keep him anyway? He’s no use to you.’

‘I can’t answer that. I am only supposed to discover your feelings in the matter.’

‘My feelings?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, I don’t know, Hansen. I don’t think I’m willing to give you my feelings unless you give me yours,’ Rupert said jokingly. They had just passed a statue of Sir Arthur Sullivan, and Rupert pointed it out, very surprised to see it. ‘I’d forgotten all about this,’ he told Hansen. ‘I suppose they put him down here because of the old Savoy Theatre. Fancy that. I’d clean forgotten it.’

‘Vodopyanov was badly injured, you know,’ Hansen went on seriously. ‘We didn’t want to move him at all.’

‘I know that. But if you could move him out of Thule you could have shifted him back to Russia. Don’t you think?’

‘I can’t answer that,’ Hansen said regretfully. ‘In fact I really only want to know why you made this fuss about him.’

‘I told you. Why don’t you let him go home?’

‘Is that really all?’

‘Is there supposed to be more?’ Rupert teased again.

‘You were with Vodopyanov for some time, after all. Perhaps there was some agreement between you, perfectly understandable of course.’

Rupert smiled and looked at Hansen. ‘There *was* an agreement,’ he admitted.

‘Yes?’

'To stick it out. That's all. To get home!'

'You stuck it out admirably,' Hansen said. He obviously liked Rupert and disliked what he was doing, but he was determined to fulfil his task. 'But that isn't quite the point. Did you really have to make such a public fuss about Vodopyanov, or take that Russian medal? I think it's simpler to be honest with you.'

'I didn't have to. But you jolly well made me. If you'd let Alexei go I wouldn't have said a word.'

'His wife telephoned you from Moscow, didn't she?'

Rupert finally laughed. 'Come on now, Oleg. What's the matter?'

'Nothing's the matter,' Hansen said solemnly. 'It's simply a problem of security. What some of our people are asking or wondering is—what's back of such unusual behaviour?'

'What's unusual about it? Don't worry. Everything's okay. You can go back and tell them that.'

'I'm afraid I can't. I accept your word, of course, but I can't say everything is exactly okay.'

'You mean you're not going to let Vodopyanov go?'

'I don't know anything about that. I can't answer for policy on the Russian. But I don't think everything's going to be okay, Mr. Royce, if you keep on behaving this way. I say that for your own good. Surely it's rather dangerous . . .'

'You're the one who's been asking all those questions about me?'

Hansen blushed and Rupert laughed again.

'You mustn't do that, you know,' Rupert told him. 'Anyway, my friends are awful liars. They'll only say the best possible things about me.'

Hansen was nonplussed. He was obviously not used to such lighthearted behaviour, and he was inclined to be very serious about his work, and also serious about the other man. He must try to understand.

'The real point of issue with us,' he said appealingly to Rupert, 'is the fact that you have access to a great deal of classified material concerning our northern defences. You know a great deal about our air channels and our radar arcs, about mutual researches into the upper atmosphere. You are even familiar with

our base at Thule, and with the method of our radio links and some codes.'

'Only the limited amount you allow the British to know,' Rupert pointed out. 'Even so . . .'

'It's been the rule of U.S. security agencies to check on everyone who has had anything to do with the Russians, which your British security doesn't seem to bother about.'

'Don't they? I didn't realize that. Is that bad?'

'We have found, after our experiences in Korea, where even some of our best men were brainwashed, that we can't afford to ignore the likelihood—I mean,' he added hastily, 'the possibility . . .'

Rupert was fascinated. 'You mean that Alexei Vodopyanov might have brainwashed me?'

'Not exactly. No. The trouble is that we can't ignore, from a security point of view, your long contact with this Russian.'

Rupert sighed. 'Poor old Alexei!' he said. 'I think it was *I* who brainwashed him. I talked him out of doing a very noble act.'

But Hansen would not laugh nor smile, and Rupert—not to be impolite—ceased to make a joke of it, although he found it very hard to be serious.

'Of course you're absolutely right,' Rupert admitted as best he could. 'We can't be too careful. But I can swear to you, Hansen, that Vodopyanov didn't brainwash me. Does that help?'

'Not much,' Hansen said glumly. 'But I think it *would* help if you refused to have anything more to do with the Russians. I don't think it's too late.'

'Too late for what?'

'I mean, they'll probably classify you now as a security risk. I'll do my best, but you'd better turn in that medal at least.'

'Oh, but I can't do that. I've accepted it.'

'That's not so good.'

'Isn't it?' Rupert realized now that Hansen was very worried, and he was doing his best to save Rupert. How could he treat such a serious and helpful man lightly? Even so,' he said, 'I feel I couldn't be so impolite.'

'I don't think politeness is a good criterion here,' Hansen told him.

'But I can't take back my word like that,' Rupert pointed out gently. 'That would be unworthy.'

Hansen seemed puzzled by this, yet it was not going to be said that he did not understand. He saw Rupert's predicament, but failed to grasp the levels of courtesy involved, which he was trying hard to appreciate. Must good manners go so far? But he promised, though not hopefully, to do what he could. It would not be his decision, of course.

'Of course,' Rupert said and they went back, and Hansen fell silent again. 'But I understand,' Rupert assured him. 'Don't worry.'

Rupert was not sure what the decision was supposed to be or what he was supposed to have understood, and when he parted company at the door with Hansen he thought: *What a serious lot these Americans are.* Then he forgot all about this small excursion, and pressed himself happily into his work.

Chapter Seventeen

It was only a week later that British security restrictions were put on Rupert.

In the meantime he had been organizing his work. He already felt—tucked away alone in this small office on the Embankment—that it was all slightly unreal. He missed his normal partner, Jack Pierpont, with whom he had worked closely for four years. But Jack was south in the Antarctic, which meant that someone else would handle his Melville Island readings. Rupert had originally been sent out to Melville to take frequent readings of low-level winds, and to set off treated balloons once every six hours for the radar screens to track into the upper atmosphere, where the zonal circulation in such high latitudes was weak, in fact almost non-existent. Was there moisture again above 80,000 feet? They were trying to discover if this were so, and though the problems were always for the general study of polar upper weather, they were also specifically for the investigation of fall-out.

But what his own records would mean would never be solved by him. He was dedicated and faithful and reliable and steady, and he had made his outside readings every six hours night and day, and released his balloons every six hours night and day; but all he could do now was to list the record and hand it over. The mathematicians and the computers would begin to add it up, because he could not claim any mathematics himself, except a navigator's difficult collision with logarithms. He had none of the theoretical kind which could suck into physics, into that amorphous mess of monumental substitutes for reality. Some younger man would do it: a trained academic, dedicated to a theoretical construction of the whole picture they wanted. Humidity, high-latitude air movement, stratospheric circulation, density, cloud studies and even cosmic-ray records—these were the raw material of the electronic birth of the weather over the pole, where most of

the northern hemisphere's weather was born. He knew it empirically after four years of it, but it was always Jack Pierpont who had taken the records of what he had done and worked them up into the final results.

Phillips-Jones, his superior, had telephoned and interrupted him. 'You'd better come over and see me,' he said mysteriously. 'It's quite important.'

Rupert gave up working rather gladly, which surprised him, and he walked along the Embankment and up through Milton Lane by the Temple to the Strand, and then into one of the Kingsway offices, where he showed his pass. On his way up in the lift he thought about Phillips-Jones who had sounded very cool on the telephone. What a pity! Rupert had not meant to upset him by going over his head to Wanscome, but how else could he get his work done? Phillips-Jones had behaved lately as if he never wanted to see Rupert again, and Rupert knew why. He simply didn't want any rich and gifted amateurs. He wanted only academically trained men in his department, men with honours degrees in physics and mathematics who could press on ambitiously with this new technique of weather which anticipated that the whole science of the atmosphere would (within a few years) become entirely mathematical and numerical. Phillips-Jones was not a mathematician himself, but he was rigidly professional, and determined to be in on the ground floor of this revolution in method.

Rupert was kept waiting, and when Phillips-Jones called him in he simply handed Rupert a Ministry document which had *Most Secret* and *Most Urgent* stamped in big red letters across the top.

'I thought you'd better see it yourself,' Phillips-Jones said stiffly.

Rupert read a letter from the Under-Secretary saying that he, Rupert Royce, was in the process of being screened for security purposes, and that while this was going on he should be withdrawn from all work of a secret nature and be denied access to all secret files, codes and documents, etcetera.

'As you know,' Phillips-Jones said quickly as Rupert looked up, 'all our work here is considered secret, more or less anyway. Almost everything you can touch in your work comes under that restriction.'

‘So what is it for?’ Rupert demanded incredulously.

Phillips-Jones was being very departmental and very formal. ‘I don’t really know what it’s for,’ he said resentfully. ‘I spoke with the Under-Secretary himself and he hardly knew either. But the Americans are obviously bothered by your behaviour with the Russians.’

‘The Americans? But what’s it got to do with them? You’re not going to put that restriction on me because of their crazy ideas, are you? Are they mad?’

‘I don’t think they’re mad. They even have a point . . .’

‘What point? Do they seriously believe that I was brainwashed by Vodopyanov? They must be insane!’

Phillips-Jones had been expecting an outburst, and he was behaving very deliberately. ‘The Americans, as you know, have a certain amount of direct interest in our department. They have to have, because after all we’re using their bases and facilities a great deal.’

‘Nonsense! Melville Island is Canadian, and Greenland is Danish, and the polar ice-cap doesn’t belong to anybody. We only use their radar and radar links at Thule. What are you talking about?’

Phillips-Jones could not keep his façade of patience for long, and he began to feel aggressively on the defensive; and though he was unable to make out much of a case for the security ban, which would obviously be total, he said sharply that he would have to insist on the point.

‘Am I supposed to stop working altogether because some idiotic American intelligence agency is putting a check on me?’ Rupert demanded.

‘The check isn’t American, it’s our own.’

‘Then it’s ridiculous, and it ought to be taken off me.’

‘That letter gives me my instructions, I’m afraid.’

‘Then, if I may say so, you’re being as childish as they are,’ Rupert told him angrily, ‘and I’m hanged if I’m going to take any notice of it.’

Phillips-Jones had small hands, one of which he used to adjust his light-weight spectacles, pushing and pulling at them nervously as he looked at Rupert. ‘I’m afraid you must. It may be only a temporary measure.’

'That's not the point. I simply can't accept such a nonsensical piece of interference.'

'I'm sorry, Royce, but you *must* accept it. I'll have to ask you for your Ministry pass at least.'

'You can ask me, but I don't think I'll give it up,' Rupert said calmly.

'Oh, but have some sense, man. I have no choice! And if you don't listen to reason, I'll simply have to instruct the guards below to keep you out,' Phillips-Jones said with a touch of hysteria.

'I can't believe that you're serious,' Rupert said in amazement.

But Phillips-Jones was adamant and high-pitched. The departmental man was winning, because he had to win. What else could he do? All very well for Royce to be so independent, but it wouldn't work in this sort of situation. Phillips-Jones felt duty-bound to restore a little balance to Royce's outlook; he must reject the subtle privilege in this man's lack of regulation.

Was this ban really so stupid?

'It's very serious, Royce,' he said, 'and the sooner you realize it, the better.'

Rupert could see the resistance and the resentment in Phillips-Jones's tight mouth—in his hurt but aggressive eyes, and Rupert was suddenly so disgusted that he took out his white pass, threw it on the desk and walked out.

It surprised Rupert; and it also hit very close to the mysterious and secret nerve which he had been living on for years. His work had always given his life the very breath of stability, it was the one dependable safeguard against any return to moneyed diletantism or to the wasteful and insatiable search for a serious purpose. The spectre of his useless father might be an exaggerated hangover from his youth, but now the fear of his age (he was almost 40) and his poor equipment for any kind of a new future were not so exaggerated. Nevertheless, it saddened him more than it angered him. Jo was more angry and indignant than he was.

'But how can a thing like this happen?' she said. 'Why don't

you go and tell the Americans that they're behaving like children?' 'What's the difference now?' he said. 'It's really that idiot Phillips-Jones. He knows it's all nonsense.'

He went over Phillips-Jones's head again to see Arthur Wanscome who said it was only some crazy security red tape. At its worst it was probably a routine check.

'These Americans have brainwashing on the brain,' Wanscome said in his Navy way, and he laughed and told Rupert that he could go to some other department for a while—any one but Phillips-Jones's.

'But that happens to be my work,' Rupert argued. 'I'm not in any mood to start looking around, just to find some other field of interest to dabble in while I'm waiting for those intelligence bloodhounds to finish with me. I'm in the middle of something quite particular, and I intend to finish it.'

'Then you'll just have to wait,' Wanscome told him, embarrassed yet suggestive of secrets and hidden information and unwanted decisions.

'Wait for what?'

'I don't know, Rupert. I honestly don't know,' Wanscome replied, and Rupert believed him.

Nobody knew who was the real source of this security ban, and the Under-Secretary himself showed Rupert a letter from the War Office which was a copy of the letter Phillips-Jones had already showed him. His friends at the War Office would only say that it was a rather silly refinement of the modern doubt—the fear that anyone who touched the Russians was contaminated by them. But they admitted that it had to be done to satisfy the Americans. What else could they do, after their experience in Korea and with Nunn May? After all, Rupert's work did overlap into some of their most secret establishments.

'You shouldn't have taken that Russian medal,' Jo said, never meaning to recriminate but always taking the first and simplest and most indignant explanation. She was alternately furious with the Americans for interfering, and angry at Rupert's reckless sport with the Russians. 'Why did you do it?' she demanded of him. 'The Russians mean nothing to you.'

'Not a thing,' he admitted.

'They why?'

He couldn't really argue with her, nor even with himself. He decided that he ought to face this with a certain amount of disinterest if he wanted to survive it, even though he felt in more danger now than he had ever been on the ice. There the danger had been physical. Here it was moral. His real nerve of survival was being threatened.

But he was not going to allow it to upset him. A lifetime of discipline was not likely to desert him now.

But Rupert was more and more at odds with them. He felt that there was a suggestion of moral blackmail in their frightened hints that if he did exactly as *they* told him to do, he would then be free to get on with his work. He was not sure what *they* wanted of him, except that he must not say and do what he (in his French way of thinking) considered reasonable and just. So he was simply not going to give in to them at all. Although, a week after they put the ban on him, the very cause and point of it—Alexei Vodopyanov—was finally released by the Americans, and allowed to go home.

An American plane had strayed off the Berlin corridor and had crashed in East Germany, and the Russians had acquired the crew and the plane, and they had announced to the Americans that they could have them all back if Vodopyanov were released. After a great deal of hard bargaining, the deal was made. A Russian turbo-prop was flown to a secret airfield in Germany where Vodopyanov was taken on board, and an American recovery crew were sent into East Germany to rescue the four-engine jet while the crew were handed over to the American commandant in Berlin.

‘So Alexei is safe and on his way home,’ Rupert said in genuine relief.

But Jo was even more angry now, because Rupert would still not do what they obviously wanted him to do—which was to renounce his ridiculous Russian medal.

‘No!’ he said angrily. ‘If I want to be a Russian hero, then that is what I’ll be.’

‘But you’re so naïve!’ Jo argued. ‘You’re worse than a child sometimes. What’s the use of being stubborn now?’

But she did not understand that if it came to a struggle between his old fight to keep his dignity, and his need to work, then his

pride would win every time. It had to win. He could not change his character now.

*

The ban stayed. Wanscome, his old Navy friend, came out again to the house to see him, and he sat down and teased Tess and smoked his short pipe and drank Rupert's whisky and said to him: 'The trouble is that once they've got their hooks into you, the whole bloody suspicion remains for ever. Intelligence is always a dirty business all round.' But with his open Navy heart (and like Rupert's other friends in other places) he was worried, and he begged Rupert to go and see an MI5 type who was sitting in a small room over Barclays Bank in Hornchurch investigating him. 'He's the silly nut,' Wanscome told Rupert. 'I found out that much. So why don't you go and explain yourself to him and finish with it?'

Rupert still did not feel like explaining himself to anyone, but obviously he couldn't go on in this ridiculous situation, particularly now that Alexci Vodopyanov was safely home. So he took a bus to Hornchurch and found the MI5 type reading *The Times* sitting on a window ledge over Barclays Bank. His office was so hot that he had his jacket off, although it was almost Christmas, and Rupert looked quickly at this secret man whose hair was brown and wavy and whose eyes were very, very doubtful.

When Rupert introduced himself and said, 'I don't know your name, but I don't suppose that is important,' the MI5 type could not prevent himself breaking the very first rule of his craft—he looked surprised.

'How did you find me here?' he asked. 'How did you even know about me?'

'Oh, there's always someone who knows these things,' Rupert said offhandedly.

'But good heavens! This is quite unusual.'

'Nevertheless I'm here. Does it matter? I was told you're the man I have to satisfy, so let me at least try to satisfy you.'

MI5 said his name was Fairfax, and he invited Rupert to sit down. He had recovered his equilibrium and he looked at Rupert curiously. It was obviously no ordinary man who would come here so boldly, but Fairfax could easily recognize in the face and manner the character of a safe man. The original suspicion

became useless, the facts (in Rupert's favour) meant nothing anyway, and Fairfax had to fight to maintain his trained professional doubt in the face of this visual evidence before him. Rupert won easily, because Fairfax admitted that there had never been much point to his inquiries, and even less to the ban on Rupert, except this pressure from the U.S. for a check on *anyone* who had ever had any close contact with the Russians. It was understandable. Rupert asked him what Vodopyanov was supposed to have done with him—was this brainwashing idea really genuine?

‘It’s always genuine,’ Fairfax replied sadly.

Rupert ridiculed it again and hoped that Fairfax was not going to be so stupid. ‘After all, you’re English, not American,’ he said to Fairfax. ‘And how on earth could one man, under those conditions, brainwash another? All we wanted to do was live through it. And anyway I don’t even know what they mean by brainwashing. Do you?’

Fairfax said it wasn’t exactly the brainwashing, it was this fear of contamination. But that was all finished with anyway.

‘In actual fact,’ he told Rupert, ‘it now rests with your head of department.’

‘Wanscome?’

‘No. The other one—Phillips-Jones. Isn’t he your section head—or is it departmental head? I get the families mixed up like the genus and the species. Which originates in what?’ He smiled encouragingly at Rupert.

‘And it’s up to Phillips-Jones?’

‘More or less. If he is satisfied, then we are. He’s the man who must hand on our report to the Minister, and it will be his recommendation that counts.’

‘What about Wanscome? After all, he’s senior to Phillips-Jones.’

‘No. It’s Phillips-Jones’s section. He is responsible for it to the Minister, direct, in the matter of security.’

‘And that’s all?’

‘I think so,’ Fairfax said, his special wavy face unbroken by ordinary expression, his secret heart quite intact, but his eyes searching for a brother in Rupert. Weren’t they all good soldiers together, and good men too? Wouldn’t Rupert please approve?

Rupert did not see and did not understand this desire to be anything but a secret man with a secret heart, and he left Fairfax in his plywood office with his old oak desk and his dim shadowy visions of men, not even curious to see how it was done or why it was done in this odd place over Barclays Bank.

What were secrets like that in Rupert Royce's life?

Rupert now felt confident, but Phillips-Jones only listened to him in amazement. How had he discovered Fairfax? Who had told him? By what right, by what extraordinary right, had he gone personally to see MI5? Rupert did not understand the point of such questions; they were hardly important. He had got there, that was all that mattered. But they were very important questions to Phillips-Jones who believed that a man under a secrets ban must behave modestly and rather shamefacedly, exactly like a man under a secrets ban. How had he ever found MI5 like that?

'What's the difference?' Rupert replied impatiently.

'But it's incredible!' Phillips-Jones said. 'You overstep the limits in a most extraordinary way sometimes. You shouldn't have done that.'

Phillips-Jones was trying not to be speechless, but Rupert could not see why he should be so upset. They were at cross-purposes already because as men they would obviously never meet. What seemed perfectly normal to Rupert (knowing somebody who knew the right person and thus cutting out all the nonsense) was a stunning piece of cheek to Phillips-Jones. Had Rupert really been so bold? No more, Rupert decided, than any man defending himself should be.

'In any case,' Phillips-Jones told him over his painfully organized desk, 'it is by no means closed.'

'Why not?' Rupert asked. 'Fairfax told me it was now your decision, and surely you're not going to delay it.'

'I'm afraid I must,' Phillips-Jones said agonizingly.

'Why? What's up now?'

'You'll never understand, Royce. It's quite hopeless trying to explain to you how a section like this must be run.'

Rupert sighed and waited.

'To begin with, *all* our work is of a secret nature.'

‘You keep reminding me of that.’

‘But I obviously must keep reminding you of something you don’t understand. Don’t you realize that even the slightest suspicion is enough to disqualify a man?’

‘Suspicion of what?’

‘Of anything.’

‘What is there to suspect me of?’

‘Nothing, of course, but . . .’

‘MI5,’ Rupert said as politely as he could, ‘removed that silly restraint. So must you.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t.’

‘Why not, for heaven’s sake?’

‘Not yet,’ Phillips-Jones said firmly. Was he playing for a sectional victory? Was he determined again (of necessity) to bring home this lesson of security to Rupert by delaying his clearance for a little while longer? Rupert could see the nervous escalator mind at work; but since there was clearly no real issue of his safety or his security, what was the point? He pressed Phillips-Jones for an answer, and Phillips-Jones could only reply stubbornly: ‘Not yet.’

Rupert was becoming impatient. ‘What *is* the matter then? This is no longer anything to do with security, so what’s up?’

‘But it *is* security. You behave so recklessly. You couldn’t help going down to get that Russian, but you could help your subsequent behaviour. You can’t be so independent if you want to stay in a section like this.’

‘You mean that ridiculous Russian medal?’ Rupert said, and laughed.

Phillips-Jones was stung. ‘It’s not only that, it’s everything else. You act sometimes as if this section were a part of you, instead of you being a part of it. That is my objection. You’re not that indispensable anyway, and until you see that you’re not really so important to us . . .’

‘That’s not very clear to me,’ Rupert said. ‘What are you saying?’

‘Perhaps I must finally make it clear. You are only in this section because of your name and because you have friends in the department. You are not exactly our kind of man, Royce. We are all academically qualified men here. There’s not a man here except

you who hasn't some academic qualification for the job he is doing.'

'I believe I do my job well,' Rupert said stiffly.

'Not always well enough. You're all right on practical work, but you know as well as I do that you can't follow through with your own field work.'

'What's that got to do with this security ban?' Rupert said, trying to direct the question back to its original point before it enveloped him in a defenceless corner.

'Everything. It's all part of the same thing. *How* you behave, *how* you got into this department, how you work in it, how you work as if it's all established for you.'

'I think you're exaggerating, and I don't think you ought to say these things.'

Phillips-Jones lost his temper and blushed. 'You see! You sit there telling me what I must or mustn't do. You can't work like that here. Your name doesn't mean anything here. You don't belong in this sort of work anyway. You really belong in some other part—in forecasting, or something simple and practical where your lack of a scientific education and your particular effectiveness are more fitted to what you have to do, and where your attitude can't distort . . .'

'I don't think you should say such things,' Rupert repeated coldly.

'But I *am* saying them. I really must say them. Your work . . .'

'You have no right to complain about my work, so don't do it.'

'But I *am* complaining about it, because you're not really up to it.'

'That's not true. I go as far as it is possible.'

'Not far enough.'

'You've never shown any dissatisfaction before.'

'Because I've covered up for you, like everybody else. And because you've always got your friends . . .'

'That's a shocking lie,' Rupert cried indignantly.

'Is it?' Phillips-Jones said bitterly. 'Well then, when you can do your own theoretical work you can call me a liar, and when your friends stop interfering in my section on your behalf you can call me a liar, and when your work is up to the standard demanded here you can call me a liar, but until then . . .'

But Rupert was so angry now, so incensed by this attack on his sacred and holy and hard-won core of labour that he stood up, white with anger and as disciplined as a man deliberately in control of his temper would be.

'You can't say that about my work,' he said. 'You can't call my work in the Arctic, or before that with the aircraft, bad. I don't care what you say . . .'

'I call it inadequate for this section,' Phillips-Jones said loudly.

'Then there's no point in my remaining as a burden on your temper, or on your goodwill either,' Rupert said in this cold way. 'You can have my resignation.'

Phillips-Jones looked at him with such hot and cold eyes that Rupert felt the temper drain out of his own heart; and he wondered why this man hated him so much. Had he really been so ill-behaved, so dependent on friends, so casual with authority, so finally incompetent in his work? 'Not at all!' Rupert decided firmly in the most ruthless call on his character to defend itself. And he was sure of it. But Phillips-Jones was sure and not-so-sure, glad and yet worried, victorious and yet doubting his right to it.

'There is no need to resign,' he said, his flushed face swallowing realms of authority, of confusion, of puzzlement that he should have done what he had just done.

'You give me no alternative,' Rupert told him calmly. 'Let us not pretend.'

'All right, I shall not pretend. As a matter of fact if you are willing to give up all contact with the Russians, we might consider it again.'

'I have no contact with the Russians.'

'That Russian medal is enough to . . .'

Rupert wondered why that had stung Phillips-Jones so hard. Was it resentment that Rupert Royce could do anything and apparently get away with it? In any case Rupert was not going to bend into this small breath of compromise, and he left Phillips-Jones without saying anything more, although he was regretting already the sad fact that he was leaving something which had meant a great deal to him.

Chapter Eighteen

Christmas was an untraditional time for Rupert. When his unreliable father had been alive they had occasionally celebrated an English Christmas in London at some large hotel, but never in the Hampstead house. When his father had died, his mother's Christmas had become happier but more erratic, and for the most part Rupert had learned to celebrate the New Year in France the way the French did, or in Italy the way the Italians did. It was Jo who had brought him back to an English commercial Christmas, which she enjoyed and celebrated to the full.

Jo still considered herself a Christian, but a very bad one. Rupert also considered his morals to be Christian, though not his religion. Jo took the children on Christmas morning to the parish church of St. John on the hill and Rupert went with them reluctantly but obediently, because Jo insisted that he show the children at least once a year where his morals came from. He argued that they didn't come from the local priest, but she insisted that indirectly they did. Where else had his sense of right and wrong come from, however indirect, but from the Church?

Like his mother, Rupert was more superstitious than religious, but he did not like to argue about religion. Jane Harrison and Frazer had taught him all about the pagan and Greek rituals, the origins of the rites of the winter solstice and the resurrection, but he had always felt guilty about this rational disbelief, and he never pressed the point on the children.

So he sat now in the pew with Tess on one side and Rolland on the other. Tess stared around her with her upside-down eyes and her small warm hand gripping his—just in case. Rolland was more solemn and attentive. But what did the boy hear or what did he think? Rupert forgot the priest and investigated his secretive

son. On the whole, Rolland was a physical copy of himself. He was fair-haired and his features were the same. But temperamentally (Rupert decided) he was going to be a mystery. He didn't see himself in his son at all, no matter how much Jo said he was his father's son in the matter of character. Tess on the other hand was all Jo. Sitting there, vain and generous and pretty in her best clothes, she was suspicious at first of all this rigmarole, but slowly her grip on him relaxed, and she soon accepted the lot—the Church of England voice, the bee-like organ, the Bacchic choir. Tess could take it all at its face value after the minimum of investigation, but Rolland was more alert with the curiosities of his schoolboy intellect, and Rupert could feel it working.

'How much money do you put in the plate?' Rolland whispered to him.

'Ten shillings for all of us,' Rupert whispered back.

'What does he do with all the money he collects?'

'Keeps himself going, or gives it to the poor,' Rupert whispered. 'At least I think that's what happens.'

'Does he keep it in a box, or does he put it in the bank?'

Rolland was fascinated by the plate and by that little pool of money in it, and Rupert saw his point. The boy was careful about money. He usually kept his weekly half-crown pocket-money in a box and spent it only when he had ten shillings, buying plastic model construction kits or torch batteries or books. Rupert admired his son for his economies, because he understood the comfort which the discipline of a forced budget gave him. It made life stable and secure. To live on no budget and never to need the necessity of strict accounting was always a temporary sort of existence, which was something that Jo never understood. She had lived her early life in a kind of elaborate country poverty. Now she wanted to enjoy the other way, and she was often reckless with money, and always expected her bank balance to show more than was there. So they would argue about cheque stubs. Why didn't she put down exactly what she paid out? It was the only time he felt insecure with her—when she was thoughtless like that about money.

He could therefore appreciate the boy's view of the priest, and he wondered himself if the priest counted up the money every Sunday evening, sighing and saying to his wife: 'Not so good

today, dear,' like a shopkeeper. Or did the deacon handle it all for him like a business manager?

Rupert decided he was thinking sacrilegiously, so he sang loudly the sort of hymns which always depressed him, yet also gave him the feeling of Jo's Christmas. She was a country girl at heart anyway, and church usually suggested the country.

The service was over, and as they walked slowly down the aisle, some of the other worshippers recognized him. He was still an interesting man for those who admired romantic Englishmen, and the priest held him in conversation at the gate for a few moments, his hands pushed boyishly into his black frock pockets. It was clear and cold, and they talked of the children. It was going to be a good Christmas and Jo kissed Rupert affectionately when they got home. She was happy with their celebrations.

Rupert, though he tried to hide it, was not so happy. He blamed his kidneys, but he could not carry off the deception so easily. After all, he had not only lost his job, he had lost the very flow of his life. It was worse, even, than he had expected.

It bothered Jo to see him so quiet, so thoughtful. 'Why should you worry so much?' she said to him. 'At least we won't starve. I don't see any sense in being upset about it. Even if you don't get another job . . .'

She hesitated at this point because they had argued this before. She knew what work meant to him, but she had never really understood the reasons for its importance. He was convinced that she didn't see its true meaning to him. Even so, she was angry that he had given up his job over a whim, and she urged him to give up all this silly resistance and go back to Phillips-Jones and settle the whole damn thing.

'Your pride is always getting in the way of your sense,' she told him. 'What's the use of that if you are going to lose everything? Surely you can settle it intelligently.'

He doubted if he could, he doubted if Phillips-Jones would listen to him now. He wanted to go back, he wanted to straighten it all out, he wanted to conform to their rules so that he could get on with his work; and yet the same spirit that had interfered with him all his life interfered with him now. He couldn't do it, even allowing for the high price he was paying.

As for the money, Jo would never take seriously his renunciation

of it, even though she had lived without it for twelve years. The money was there! It was always there. A letter to his mother—and in a day he would be back where he started from. And it was this temptation to throw in his discipline and go back to the summer ease of his full pockets that made it more difficult. With Jo's realistic demands for it, and his own permanent fear of it, he found his situation difficult, so he would argue angrily with her about it, far more angrily than he intended to.

'But it's *your* money!' she would cry. 'Why are you always like that? Why are you always so afraid of it or so ashamed of it? I don't understand. I'll never understand.'

'Don't let's talk about it,' he warned her dramatically. 'Even if we have to starve, I shan't touch it.'

'Well, I'm damned if I'm going to starve,' she argued passionately. 'And what about your children? Are they supposed to suffer for your crazy theories and your bloody-mindedness? You're quite mad.'

'I know,' he said gently. 'But . . .'

She would not listen to him, and though she was in tears an hour later, and he was asking her to forgive him, none the less their differences remained.

These were not the ingredients for a good Christmas, but he would subdue his heart and make it what Jo wanted it to be for a day or so. He loved his wife, he loved his children, his life was small and compact and meaningful (as he had desired it to be), he had money in the bank, he could certainly get another job somehow, and it was a fine clear cold Christmas Day, with aeroplanes making pure white vapour trails high in the sky.

He would stick it out until the New Year. Then he would face it again. Then he would fight once more this old conflict of his life, this struggle against the temptations of money and a badly directed existence which beckoned to him (he imagined) from his dead father and his rootless mother.

It was hard not to blame Alexei Vodopyanov for causing this monstrous upheaval in his life.

He made a serious attempt to get his job back in the New Year. He was not going to ring Phillips-Jones himself, but he rang up

Arthur Wanscome and asked him if he could smooth it over with Phillips-Jones.

‘Say anything,’ Rupert told him. ‘Tell him I agree with everything he says. Tell him anything you like.’

‘But why didn’t you agree with everything the bastard said in the first place?’ Wanscome wanted to know. ‘Why did you argue with a sod like that at all?’

‘I didn’t argue with him,’ Rupert insisted. ‘He rammed inefficiency and inadequacy and privilege down my throat. Was I supposed to agree with that?’

‘I suppose not,’ Wanscome said reluctantly, and said he would ring Rupert back, or better still Rupert should come and see him in a day or two.

Rupert waited patiently, and when he went to see Wanscome he could tell from his blunt Navy face that the news was not so good. They stood looking over the back alley of a back room of the Ministry to a radio room where W.R.N.S. were fiddling with big grey machines and typing out long strips of coded messages.

‘You’re up against security,’ Wanscome said to him, biting his pipe like a dog biting a bone. ‘And that’s one place where I can’t help much these days. I don’t know anybody who can help you there as a matter of fact, because it’s like an octopus with no head. Once those tentacles are out, nobody knows where they really come from. I did find that MI5 chap for you, but that’s about the limit of my influence.’

‘But I settled all that security business with Fairfax.’

‘Maybe you did. Nobody ever really believed that you were brainwashed by one poor sick Russian. But Phillips-Jones is cleverer than that. He claims that you may be okay as far as your contact with the Russian is concerned, but he says you’re too reckless and too self-willed for his kind of work anyway. He says that you expose the department to dangerous misunderstandings with the Americans, or something like that.’

‘God Almighty! So he’s still trying to keep me out for security reasons.’

‘I agree! I know! He’s a little upstart, with a little knob of power under his seat, but it’s real power when it comes to deciding the issue of his own staff. He’s got a security bomb in one hand, and a chunk of blind idiocy in the other, and I can’t shift either.’

'But didn't you tell him that I was penitent and on my knees?'

'More or less; but he feels he's got away with it now. You left it a bit late. You should have done all this the next day. Anyway, he doesn't believe you, and he's talking *his* kind of security, which is hard to argue with.'

'Then what about the work? That's quite valuable, and they can't just brush it off.'

'Yes, they can,' Wanscome told him sorrowfully. 'Do you know what Jonesy did when you were lost on the ice? He fixed it up for someone else to go out and do your work all over again, since we all assumed that you'd had it. I discovered yesterday that there is someone else who has been out there since, and has repeated your work and who is academically qualified, etcetera, etcetera.'

'So that's it!' Rupert said.

'I didn't know anything about it,' Wanscome told him regretfully. 'He wanted you out anyway, and as long as he's got this security trick hanging over you, it's no go, Rupert. Security, by God! That was a gift, that was. He always thought you were there as a favour anyway.'

It was unfair, it was abysmally unjust, it was cold-blooded prejudice, and it was so reckless with a man's life that Rupert felt sick with his fury, disgust, resentment, pain, helplessness, and the taste of betrayal.

Yet it passed almost instantly, because he knew it was hopeless. It could not be undone now, and he would not let it eat him into bitterness. For that small-hearted man? It was going to be a big victory for Phillips-Jones, but Rupert was not going to help him with it, and he sat listening to Wanscome offering him dull alternatives in other sections, other departments. But he was saying to himself: 'Stop-gaps won't help me now. I'm damned if I'm going to crawl into a hole.'

'The trouble is,' Wanscome was also saying to him carefully and evasively, 'you did make a bit of a fool of him with that Russian medal. After all, he's got to hold his head up in the face of all that American security guff that's flying about.'

'I suppose you're right,' Rupert said.

'It's ridiculous, though,' Wanscome suggested.

Rupert wondered if the happy Wanscome thought it so ridiculous himself, and his suspicions were too quickly confirmed.

'It wouldn't be a bad idea if you got rid of all that stuff about being a Russian hero,' Wanscome said. 'It stands to reason.'

'But you know why I accepted that Russian medal,' he said to Wanscome.

'I'm damned if I do.'

'Listen, Arthur. I had to get Alexei Vodopyanov home. That was the only way we got through that experience. That was the way we survived. It became the whole point of it for both of us. It might have been foolish of me to push the Americans so hard, but I had to do what I could to persuade them—one way or the other.'

'I suppose you did,' Wanscome agreed, 'but you should drop it now.'

'Maybe. But I don't like to go back on my word.'

'It's that or no peace with Phillips-Jones.'

Rupert knew now that it would also mean no peace with Arthur Wanscome. Why were they making such a fuss of that Russian medal? It was not a genuine security concern, because who really doubted his safety and his utter reliability? Wanscome didn't, and even Phillips-Jones didn't. The Americans might be lurking about somewhere but he could not blame the Americans, and on the whole they were probably right. No. It was a more remote fear of something intangible and ridiculous which was trying again to press him into the same mould, and he was resisting it.

'I don't think I can give it up,' he said stubbornly.

'But for God's sake, why not, man?' Wanscome appealed. 'It doesn't mean a damn to you, I know it doesn't.'

'I know that too, Arthur. It was always a bit of a joke to me. But I think you're all being bloody silly about it, and I'm not going to change my mind.'

Wanscome shrugged and looked at his hands. 'Then you can't expect Phillips-Jones to take kindly to you, and I can't force you onto him.'

'I don't want you to do that,' Rupert said edgily, and it was clear now that Wanscome was also playing this security affair like Phillips-Jones. Was he also affected? Was the whiff of that word

enough to send even hardy and good friends like Wanscome reaching for their safety belts, just in case? Did they all lose their own intelligence and their own minds and their own understanding of a man so easily? He didn't want to believe it of Wanscome, and yet he knew it was so. Arthur Wanscome was behaving like any departmental man cornered by this monster.

Wanscome felt this sharp lick of Rupert's critical judgment. 'It's all Parkinson's law anyway,' Wanscome said in embarrassment and swept a hand over his huge polished desk covered by worn grey files, messages, memos, summaries, a hundred things coming IN and another hundred going OUT.

'It's always Parkinson's law,' Rupert agreed dryly. Wasn't it also a continuation of the Eton method? You must fit, or else.

'Nobody wanted it to turn out this way,' Wanscome told him. 'Not even Phillips-Jones. But you must admit, Rupert, you bloody well brought it on yourself.'

'Don't tell me that, Arthur. You know as well as I do that this had nothing to do with security to begin with.'

'But that's the way it's bloody well ended up!'

'Then I'm not going to submit to that sort of petty blackmail. I shan't do it!'

Wanscome shrugged sadly, and Rupert left him, feeling that something was wrong when such an outside interference could get hold of a good non-departmental man like Arthur Wanscome.

When he had gone, Wanscome stood at his window and looked over at the hard-working, obedient, unquestioning Wrens and thought: 'Are we all supposed to be like that?' He was sorry he had come down on Phillips-Jones's side, but what else could he do? 'What's Rupert got to worry about anyway?' he told himself bitterly. 'He doesn't need this job, or Phillips-Jones, or anybody else for that matter.'

Rupert was a rich man. Not worth putting your neck out on an unknown security risk for a man who made a sport of work.

Chapter Nineteen

How the newspapers discovered that he had left the department he would never know, but a very stout newspaperman wrapped in tweed with a wiggly moustache and a very red face found him and invited himself in by announcing that his name was Sanderson and that he had heard about Rupert Royce having security trouble at the Air Ministry. Was that true?

Rupert was caught unawares for a moment. *So someone had leaked it out!* But who could have done it? He thought of Phillips-Jones who might be rubbing more salt into sore wounds, but he decided that this was an unworthy guess. The more Sanderson talked, the more Rupert knew that this time he would have to defend himself. So he brought Sanderson in, and they sat uncomfortably in the cold dining-room over the glass table while Jack Sanderson—this famous ex-sportsman who had become a collector of sensational stories for his newspaper—tried to persuade Rupert by his manner that he was going to be restrained and decent about the story, whereas Rupert knew that he was not going to be restrained or decent about it at all. That wasn't his style. Nevertheless they proceeded on this basis.

'Did they sack you?' Sanderson asked bluntly.

'They did not. I resigned.'

'Why?'

'I think I'm still under that ban not to discuss departmental business with the press.'

'That's okay if you're holding the right end of the stick,' Sanderson said. 'But you're holding the wrcng ena.'

'I know that, but even so I don't think I should talk.'

'You mean it isn't honourable?' Sanderson said and laughed like a hippopotamus. He was a good-natured man, and Sanderson had years ago been nicknamed 'Santaclaus' by his newspaper colleagues. His fat heartiness was good meat for his job.

'I hadn't thought of the honour,' Rupert answered, 'but it's a point.'

'We have a strange picture of you, Royce,' Sanderson told him professionally. 'Or rather we have created the picture of you—a kind of stubborn old-fashioned English romantic. I hope you're not going to spoil it by being very dull and very honourable now. Why did you resign? For your health?' Sanderson said cynically.

Rupert shrugged off the only restraint he felt. It wasn't his honour he was worried about now, but the nuisance of what was about to happen. He knew that he was going to get the worst of it if he didn't make his point to Sanderson, so why shouldn't he talk?

'I resigned because the head of my section criticized my work,' he said. 'And he's a small-minded man.'

'But you *were* under a security ban at the time.'

'That's true.'

'Ahhh! Why? What happened in those six months in the Arctic? Were they suspicious of where you were, or of what you'd really been doing? Did they suspect that you'd really been to Russia, or something like that?'

Rupert was amazed. Was that going to be the story? He thought it was supposed to be Vodopyanov and brainwashing. 'For God's sake don't print that,' he said unthinkingly. 'That's the most insane idea I've ever heard. Who told you that?'

'That's what I've heard.'

'I don't care what you've heard.'

'That's what I'll have to print if I can't get the truth.'

'You'll be printing a libel if you do. The truth is that the Americans worried about me being brainwashed by the Russian pilot, or something idiotic like that. You can treat that seriously if you like.'

'And that's gospel truth? You mean they think he brainwashed you?'

'Absolutely. Check it with your friends.'

'No. No. I can take your word for it. Even so, why didn't you ever hand back the Russian medal? That's what they also wanted, isn't it?'

'I don't know why I didn't,' Rupert said irritably. 'I didn't, that's all.'

‘And that’s still a fly in the ointment?’

‘That seems to be it.’

‘So you’re out!’

‘That’s right.’

‘What are you going to do about it?’

‘I’m talking to you about it, and I’m hoping that you’ll be at least half-truthful.’

‘That’s not tactful,’ Sanderson said and laughed from his belly. He was in a good mood. He understood men like Rupert. He always looked for good sportsmanship, fair play. Royce looked like a decent chap, full of fair play. He certainly wasn’t a mean man, and that counted for a lot. Sanderson could hate meanness with a stout man’s hatred for skinniness.

‘You know you can still be prosecuted for talking to me,’ he said jovially to Rupert, looking carefully at him as if to test his frightened nerves.

‘It’s too late to bother about that now,’ Rupert told him.

‘And you’ve probably cooked your goose for any other job where a security okay is necessary.’

‘I doubt if I’ll ever have to worry about that.’

‘The Americans can get you chucked out on a whim,’ he said. (Sanderson’s paper didn’t like Americans very much.)

‘That’s not true, so don’t write it.’

‘Why not? It’s basically true these days, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t think it’s the Americans at all,’ Rupert insisted.

‘Ah well,’ Sanderson sighed with his hearty, Edwardian largesse. ‘I’ll do my best for you, Royce. Trust me.’

Rupert hoped that Sanderson’s best was not going to be something he himself was going to regret. But he felt that he should not regret anything that would make Phillips-Jones squirm a little. He was not above enjoying some revenge.

Jo was angry and incredulous again. Jo read only the fears she had become accustomed to in such cases. Rupert’s name was suddenly linked with traitors and spies and the most frightful people who were always branded by the very use the newspapers made of that word *security*. How could Rupert have been foolish enough to allow this to happen to him? It was terrible.

'People,' Jo cried, 'will begin to look at us sideways if this goes on.'

Rupert asked her what 'people' she meant.

'You don't go up on the hill to shop, or go down the hill to see acquaintances and friends,' she said.

Rupert, who wasn't upset by Sanderson's story at all, said he didn't care what people were going to say or think.

'Are you going to stand above it all as usual?' Jo asked him bitterly.

'Oh, it's all nonsense anyway, Jo.'

'But he made you out to be such a suspicious and strange person. Did they really ever doubt that you were on that ice-cap at all?'

'Sanderson made that up.'

'But that's terrible! It's practically suggesting that you went to Russia instead of almost dying on the ice.'

'Who'd believe that?' Rupert said calmly.

But Jo read it (she said) the way everybody else would read it, which meant that he was still under terrible suspicion, and had been more or less forced to resign because he might have secretly gone to Russia.

They began to quarrel about it, and when a dozen more newspapermen pressed on the locked garden gate and shouted out: 'Come down, Royce, and make a statement or something!' she was frightened of them but angry enough to want to turn the hose on them. The children could not be let out, and the milk couldn't come in. There were photographers with long-range lenses photographing the kitchen door, the upstairs windows, the barking dog.

'Ohhhh!' Jo groaned angrily. 'But why did you *do* it?'

Rupert knew he would have to face the reporters sooner or later. She knew that look in his eye and that cold manner which came on him when he was resisting something he didn't like. He had it now, and she didn't like it because he was not the amenable and courteous man she was used to, and she was cut off.

He faced the reporters at the gate in a soft drizzle. *What about all this security talk, Mr. Royce? Was there anything in it?* He told them what he had told Sanderson, and they questioned him closely about his supposed trip to Russia, about brainwashing,

about American interest in him, about Vodopyanov, about his Russian medal; and finally one of them said: 'Since it all seems to have started when you accepted that Russian medal, are you thinking of changing your mind and handing it back?'

'I haven't even got the medal.'

'But they claim you accepted it.'

'That's true.'

'Are you going to tell them now that you don't want it?'

'Why should I do that? It wouldn't be very polite,' Royce said.

'They also say that the Russians have invited you to Russia. Is that correct?'

'That's quite correct.'

'Will you go?'

'I don't see why not, if I want to go.'

'Do you think they'll let you leave this country?'

'Who on earth would stop me?' Rupert said incredulously.

'Security men stopped Edmund Jackson at the airport when he wanted to go to a conference in Russia three years ago. Why won't they do the same to you?'

'I'm not an atomic scientist, which Jackson is.'

'But you worked in a secret establishment.'

'I know. But they're not going to stop me travelling because of that. I'll go where I want to go . . .'

'So you'll go to Russia?'

'I told you—I'll go if I want to.'

He closed the gate, and left them begging for more.

Chapter Twenty

Rupert had never thought about going to Russia. He had even forgotten that the Russians had invited him. Now some slipshod newspaper said that he was waiting to fly to Moscow to collect his hero's medal, and to enjoy the welcome which the Russians would give him.

Rupert did not bother to deny it, and for Jo's sake he refused to talk to the reporters again. Wanscome was the Ministry spokesman who replied to all these stories, and he denied that there was any security restraint on Rupert, or that he had been fired for security reasons. *Did the Ministry believe that Royce had been to Russia and not on that polar ice?* 'Preposterous!' Wanscome told them, and said that Rupert had resigned because of a personal dispute with the head of a section. Rupert Royce could work anywhere else he wanted to in the department, including secret establishments. They asked him about the Russian medal, but Wanscome said he could not discuss that because it was too bloody silly to discuss.

Wanscome later rang Rupert and said, 'That settled their hash,' and again offered him several new jobs, because after all he *was* an experienced practical man. But without knowing why, and without shaking off this feeling of distaste, Rupert turned them all down, and he said a little cynically to Jo:

'I'm too old and too reckless for that so-called practical work.'

'You're just forty, so don't talk about being too old for anything.' Jo was beginning to hate talk of age. In three years she would also be forty.

'Nevertheless it's true,' he argued. 'Most of these purely practical jobs are for younger men, for beginners. I can hardly fool myself about that any more.'

He had already come to several other conclusions about himself and his work, walking in his garden, or up and down the

Hampstead hills and across the old paths of the heath with Fidge yapping around the bushes. At first he had asked himself if he had been right, originally, to be so modest in his demands. Was it enough to be satisfied with practical work, and in such awe of it?

'There is surely more purpose to work than that,' he told himself again and again.

But whatever he did he would never go back to the Meteorological Office. The joys of that small world had suddenly fallen to pieces. Phillips-Jones had undone that self-deception, and he realized now that during his four good years there, he had depended entirely on Jack Pierpont's scientifically educated brains as a substitute for his own. Phillips-Jones was right. He did not have the right kind of education for serious scientific work.

So it was over, and he must find another future. At forty he was not sure that he could do that easily. He had no idea where to begin.

*

Rupert went through several stages of doubt; but then he took up his early interest in classical archaeology without showing any outward signs of a serious crisis.

He began to go every day to the British Museum. The early Aegean and pre-Homeric civilization had always interested him, and he read through Homer and Aeschylus to give himself a base, from which he would work backwards. He also read T. H. Gomperz, the Austrian classical scholar, and in Volume I of Gomperz he came on a short passage about the Greek colonies on the Black Sea. This seemed to be a portion of Greek culture which had not been investigated very much—archaeologically—and it made him curious.

He discovered that even before 700 B.C. the Milesians had begun to colonize the Black Sea coast, and that under the Democracy the Greeks had developed all these colonies to absorb the poorer and the more vigorous surplus populations of the cities. He could picture those Greek plantations, stretching from the steppes of the Don to the coastline of Spain. These colonizers must have been the hardiest and most courageous young men of Greece, and their Greek culture was probably so strong that it quickly absorbed or overran all the local superstitions. He could already admire the capacities of these ambitious men—capacities

which must have increased enormously as they were forced on and on by this stimulating business of building an empire.

'Merit', Gomperz told him about these men, 'counted for more than descent. A man there was a man; good work could command a good wage and poor work meant a hard bed and indifferent protection.'

With this hardy ideal in mind, Rupert began to look deeper into the Black Sea colonies, and he searched first of all in the records of the ancients themselves: Homer, Arrian, Herodotus, Strabo, Pliny and Polybius. He found fragments about these Black Sea districts in most of the classical geographers, but there was very little contemporary western investigation, except for one very good study of the Scythians by a man named Minns.

What he *had* discovered in Strabo was the mention of a small but mysterious Black Sea island off the mouth of the Danube which was called Leucc. It was also called the island of Achilles. He went back to Arrian and discovered that the goddess Thetis had given her son, Achilles, the island as a present, and that Achilles had probably lived on the island and had erected there a temple to himself. The islanders—the people and the goats—had been sacrificed to him, and a strong cult of Achilles had remained there for centuries.

The island was apparently still there, a little farther off the mouth of the Danube but the same one. It was now called the Island of Serpents by the Russians who owned it. But he found very little about this modern island documented in the British Museum, and because he was always the amateur and without the richer resources of the professional, he went on trying to build up his own history of the island, until he thought, on the evidence, that he might be able to show that Leuce and Achilles Isle and the modern Isle of Serpents were one and the same. If so, it was something worth investigating, archaeologically.

Jo watched Rupert's new interest without being very much surprised or impressed by it. She was beginning to worry about him. The newspapers had forgotten him for the moment, but she knew now that he was deliberately occupying himself. Rupert disliked indecision, and he also hated fuss about making deci-

sions, and he had slipped too easily into this new activity. She did not believe in it. She saw in those doubtful blue eyes and in his set cheekbones a much harder struggle, which he would never reveal to her.

'Even so,' she thought, 'I wish he'd talk to me about it.'

Her mind rushed to extremes. She wanted to comfort him, or to be very irritated with him. But when she tried to be considerate and patient with him, he suspected her.

'There's nothing wrong with me,' he told her suspiciously, because he usually got that sort of consideration from her when he was ill.

'Then go to the devil!' she said furiously.

He had provoked her back to her usual impatience.

Yet he did reveal himself once, talking to Dr. Marian Crayford. Jo felt jealous of them when they were together, because they could talk seriously to each other, the way they would never talk to her. Marian had asked him what he was doing, and Rupert had replied calmly that he was probably wasting his time, although there was little else he could do, at his age, and with his point of view.

'You know, Rupert,' Marian told him, 'I have never discovered exactly what your point of view is.' Her kind eyes investigated his to find a link which might suggest that he needed her help.

'That's because you're like everybody else,' he said. 'You think that my point of view is "orthodox."

'Well, isn't it?'

'How can you say that?'

'All right, I won't. But if you *are* so orthodox, what exactly are you orthodox about?'

'I'm not sure. But I suppose I wonder every now and then, Marian, what we're all up against. That's all it is. And I haven't found any answers to that yet.'

'That's because you start off without a moral base,' she said.

Marian was a Roman Catholic and she had a sound moral base herself, which he always admired her for. She was a children's clinic doctor, a member of the board of the school which Rolland attended, a member of the committee to preserve rural Hampstead, a member of the Hampstead Labour Party, a J.P., and a

sympathetic supporter of her Church's medical work with lepers in south-west Africa. But the cautious despair in Marian's approach suggested that envelopment of some sort was always frighteningly near.

'What moral base would you like me to have?' he asked her. He was playing dominoes near the fire with Tess, and he rapped her small fingers when she tried to steal one of his men and shift it in her own favour. 'A religious one?'

'That might help,' she said.

'Religion has no morals left to help the world with,' he announced.

'Perhaps,' she admitted gently. 'But what else has a moral value?'

'I don't know. It isn't the moral values I'm thinking of. We will probably have to learn to get along without them. Do you think that's the point? Anyway, it's *purpose* I'm really talking about. What's the purpose?'

'But how on earth can you separate morals and purpose?' she cried.

He said that perhaps you couldn't. 'But I kept thinking, when I was out on the ice, that we are all savages—without much intelligent purpose in our lives.'

Marian thought she understood. 'We began as murderers, and I suppose we must continue as murderers,' she said regretfully.

'I don't mean that at all,' he said to her. 'What I'm talking about is the sort of life we lead. There's a terrible lack of purpose in it.'

Marian picked up Tess, who had given up the game already and was sucking her fingers sleepily and watching them with her mother's suspicious eyes. 'You must always remember that you're an exception to the rest of us,' Marian said, teasing him a little. 'No matter what you say.'

'Don't be silly.'

'But you are! You never had to struggle.'

'I am very typical,' he insisted. 'Whether I am rich or poor, I haven't really been adequately used. That's the trouble. Are most men ever used to their full capacity? Tell me that.'

'But that's inevitable.'

'Why is it?'

'Because it wouldn't be possible to use everybody flat out. There would never be enough genuine work to absorb all the talent. Anyway, we can't all be constructors.'

'How can you say such a thing?' he argued. 'Most people could be much more useful. Most people are only half-trained for living, like me. Most people function in low gear all their lives, like me. Most people dream, quite sincerely, of something much better. I know they do! I'm sure they do.'

'Then you ought to go into politics,' she said.

'I hate politics,' he said dispassionately.

For several years she had tried to persuade him to vote Labour. He had always voted Tory because he said that he couldn't see the difference. 'You've all been to the same schools and have exactly the same ideas—both sides. Most of the Labour Party would faint with fright if this country ever became socialist. Even you, Marian. You call yourself a socialist, but you'd hate socialism. So would I. I won't vote for you because your party is just a watered-down Tory party, and I prefer the original.'

'If you hate politics,' she said now, 'you have no right to talk about purpose or morals in life. You must choose either religion or politics if you want to moralize.'

'I know,' he admitted. 'But I'm really too much of a coward to go that far.'

She was not supposed to believe that. Yet it flooded her own feelings with hope. Was this firm-minded man, whom she admired so much, also in need of one huge, outside and superior moral support which would hold off the terror of the world? Did he also need God to protect him?

She shook her head. 'I can't believe you're any kind of a coward,' she said. 'Not the famous Rupert Royce.'

'But it's true,' he said firmly. 'I think this experience with Phillips-Jones and Wanscome, and all that business with security, showed it to me.'

'I just don't see what you mean.'

'Why should I have ever tried to confine my life in order to save it?' he said. 'That's what I mean.'

'Oh, that!'

'Why should I have always tried to reduce myself to its smallest factor—which is simply to work well and to obey the rules?'

‘But you’ve never obeyed the rules in your life, Rupert.’

‘Why do you say that?’ he demanded. ‘It seems to me I’ve spent my whole life trying to do little else.’

But she laughed at him and ridiculed the idea.

‘Oh well, I don’t suppose I fit in very easily,’ he admitted. ‘I don’t suppose I will ever be able to hand myself over lock, stock and barrel. That’s what I feel now, anyway. Why should I go on trying to force myself into one cell—work—because I am terrified of what will happen to me in the other cell—money?’

‘But like Jo, I’ll never understand why you’re so afraid of your money,’ she said.

‘That’s because you’ve never had it.’

‘That’s so true,’ she said and laughed, hugging Tess.

‘You don’t know how money does its real damage,’ he went on seriously. ‘Money always persuades you that whatever you are doing is right. That’s what usually destroys the sensibilities of rich people. That is what damaged and ruined my parents, and I’ve always known the same temptations myself. It still tempts me.’

‘I can’t believe that either. Not with your will power.’

‘Oh, yes it does,’ he said rather angrily. ‘But that’s only half of it. What I begin to see now is that the other half isn’t so good either. I was a very small and quite expendable man in the meteorological office. I was really nothing at all. I was better than Phillips-Jones thought I was, but even so it was still a pigeon-hole with no point to it at all, except that I was working. Isn’t that how most people work? They get a job and they do it and they keep their noses clean and that’s all it is. Then their time is up, so they die. There is no ultimate point to it at all, except keeping themselves alive.’

‘Isn’t that enough?’ Marian asked, surprised.

‘Is that enough for you, Marian? Surely you want more than that. You want to give your work some meaning. Of course you do.’

‘That’s true.’

‘Then so should I, don’t you think?’

‘I suppose so, Rupert. But that’s why Jo has always tried to persuade you to live your own life without all that fuss about work.’

‘No. Jo wants me to take back my money again, because she’s been poor.’

‘Will you take it back?’ Marian asked him frankly.

‘I don’t know. I’m not sure yet what I’ll do.’

‘Why are you so interested in archaeology, or Greece, or whatever it is? Do you think that will solve it for you?’

He shook his head. ‘Not really. I’m just removing myself,’ he said. ‘I’ve stepped aside for a while, to see if I can discover what it’s all about.’

‘Only a rich man can think like that,’ Marian told him, teasing him again. They were suddenly aware of Jo, who had been waiting by the window without saying anything to them, listening. She had come for Tess, and when she took her from Marian she said as she left: ‘Go on. Don’t let me interrupt you.’

Rupert blushed. He knew all the implications in that remark.

Marian hardly noticed it. ‘Tell me,’ she said. ‘When you were a rich man, Rupert, didn’t it ever bother you that you had so much, and that others had so little?’

‘Of course it did,’ he said. ‘But that’s *not* why I gave it up. That is not the way I think at all.’

Chapter Twenty-one

It was not going to be easy to persuade Jo that they should all go to Russia for a holiday, simply because he had become curious about Greek history along the shores of the Black Sea.

‘You only want to prove to everybody that you will do as you please,’ she said, when he suggested it. ‘Well, I don’t.’

‘I don’t think it’s that,’ he said seriously. Yet he knew there must be an element of his old resistance in the idea.

‘It’s a terrible country,’ she insisted. ‘Why do you want us to go there? You can go alone.’

‘Oh, come on, Jo,’ he appealed. ‘The Black Sea is supposed to be a wonderful holiday place. You and the children can stay in a resort and I’ll wander up and down the coast looking at what I want to see.’

‘And what if the children fall ill?’

‘There are doctors.’

‘Doctors?’ she cried. ‘What sort of doctors?’

‘Then it’s only a day by air to London.’

‘I hate flying.’

Jo was not going to be rational, but Rupert knew that by patience he might overcome her wildest fears, and by persuasion he might even make the trip attractive.

‘After all,’ he told her, ‘you don’t want to bring up your children without any spirit of adventure or curiosity. And if you don’t like it, you can always come back.’

‘I shan’t like it,’ she argued, ‘so why should I go there at all? Why must we always prove *your* point? Sometimes you are simply a dilettante . . .’

She was sorry the moment she said it, and she burst into angry denunciations of him, then tears. She left the house and only came back when she was wet through and pitiful, so that he for-

gave her that terrible word, which he didn't mind all that much. But Jo remained in a passion and she clung to him in a fit of love and trust and admiration. When she was feeling guilty she was inclined to love him without qualifications, and Rupert would exhaust himself reassuring her and loving her and proving that it didn't matter. Then she would relax happily and tell him what a wonderful man he was.

Afterwards, he said the trip didn't really matter. But she knew that it did matter. She knew that his mind and his heart were set on it, and through the exhaustion and tears and anger and happiness, she agreed.

He rang up the Soviet Embassy, and through three or four dark mysterious voices reached Mayevsky.

'I rang you up,' Rupert said to him, 'about visiting Russia.'

Mayevsky was delighted, enchanted. He invited Rupert to go and see him. Rupert went to the Embassy in Millionaires' Row, and was surprised by its old-fashioned grandeur. He expected something more run down, which he knew was absurd. He found Mayevsky in the rose garden with the Ambassador, Mr. Malik. Rupert looked at this urbane and cheerful man and thought: 'How cunning they are to be like that.' Malik laughed, showed him the roses he grew, talked about trout fishing, and congratulated him on his bravery and good sense.

'Anything you want in our country is yours,' he said. 'Tell Mr. Mayevsky and he will arrange everything.'

Malik left him with Mayevsky, who told Rupert a story about the Ambassador's ornamental goldfish, which were kept in a small marble pond in the lush greenhouse.

Mayevsky's gold teeth flashed, and he ducked his head like a small boy telling a secret, and he said to Rupert:

'One of the other Secretaries and myself like to go fishing in the Shepperton reservoir, for pike. It was a Saturday afternoon and no live bait. No bait, and no shops opened. So my friend looked in here and said—*What's the matter with these little fishes?* I warned him they were the Ambassador's favourite pet fishes. *Never mind*, my friend said, *we can borrow them and then I'll go first thing Monday morning to the fish-shop and buy some more and put them back in and he won't know the difference*. So that's what we did. We go out to the reservoir, catch fish, cooked them right

there (although that's not allowed, but we gave the *garde-cham-pêtre* a little vodka, eh . . .) Mayevsky nudged Rupert and laughed. 'Then we come back. But my friend thought *I* would replace the fish, and I thought he would. So neither of us did. So on Tuesday the Ambassador passes this pond and says: "Where are my fishes?" A big discussion! Where is the Embassy guard? Who finally could have got the fish? Cats? No—that's impossible in here. Where were the fish? More discussion, and the Embassy guard finally persuades the Ambassador it was a cat. My friend then did a foolish thing. He bought some more fish and put them back in, and the Ambassador passes here the next day and sees his fish back again.' Mayevsky laughed heartily and Rupert could not help laughing with him. 'What a commotion! Where did the fish come back from? Who put the fishes back? Was it the same cat that took them away? Terrible commotion . . .'

'Did you ever tell him?'

'Oh no! That would not be nice. Nobody knows. A big mystery in the Embassy. Who took fish, and who put fish back again? And why?'

Rupert was already in a good mood, and he looked at Mayevsky and thought again: 'How cunning are you? Why are you telling me this?'

'Well now,' Mayevsky said, letting his breath out. 'So you want to visit our country.'

'Yes,' Rupert told him. 'That is, if it's possible.'

'Of course it's possible.'

'I mean, I'm not sure that what I suggest will be possible.'

Rupert suggested a complex arrangement. He wanted to go to the Black Sea. ('Of course!') He would like a place where his family could stay in privacy, a cottage or something like that. ('Of course!') Somebody to look after them ('Naturally!') while he went along the coast looking at several famous sites of Greek colonies. ('Ah, you're interested in Greek archaeology. We can get our experts to show you!')

'No, no! I don't want experts, thank you,' Rupert said. 'Just someone to translate for me. My Russian isn't very good.'

Mayevsky said it was all possible, quite simple; and of course he must stay in Moscow to be received properly, to be presented with his hero's medal.

But Rupert was firm. 'I don't wany any fuss of any kind, if you don't mind. I don't want anything elaborate, anywhere.'

'Wouldn't you like to see some of our weather stations in the north, or some of our new researches or industries? Would your wife like to see some schools?'

'No, thank you,' Rupert said. 'We would like a day or so in Moscow, and then a month on the Black Sea. I would particularly like to visit an island off the mouth of the Danube called the Island of Serpents.'

'Ah, but that's Rumanian,' Mayevsky said. 'That can't be ours.'

'No. This island belongs to Russia.'

'Then of course you can see it, Mr. Rupert. Everything will be arranged.'

*

Rupert, continuing his researches into Achilles and his island, heard nothing more from Mayevsky or the Embassy, which was a strange but apparently typical silence. He had a friend, Paul Poole, who had been to Moscow. Paul was a clever linguist who had added Russian to his four other languages, three of which he taught Navy Intelligence officers; or rather he taught Navy Intelligence officers how to interrogate in the modern and psychological method—in Greek, Czech and Polish. Each language had its own psychology. He was studying Russian social psychology to add to his course, and he had gone to Russia the year before as a tourist.

'You must stay at the Metropole or the National in Moscow. Don't let them put you up in one of their new-fangled places,' he told Rupert. 'You can always get Soviet atmosphere somewhere else. But these old hotels are so thick with the real Russia that you can scrape it off the walls.'

Paul, who was a natural and open-hearted adventurer, told Rupert exciting stories of his escapes and adventures in Moscow. He said he had gone out to the university one day and just wandered in and talked to dozens of students freely, until someone asked who he was. The students had thought he was one of their foreign students. He had also joined a rowing club on the Moscow river by posing as a visiting communist English professor reading up Herzcn in the Lenin Library. He had visited the big bakery in

Moscow by attaching himself to a delegation of Belgian communist pastry-workers and he was only discovered because he was asked to speak at the tea they were given, and he made the mistake of trying to talk about something he didn't know about—bread-making. The Russians hadn't detected him, but the Belgians had.

'It was wonderful practice, though,' he said, recounting with nostalgia and pleasure other and similar experiences. 'You had to be on your toes all the time. I got out of that pastry business by pretending I was a French delegate to another conference and had arrived late and had mixed up my delegation.'

'Did they believe you?'

'Certainly they did,' Paul said gaily. 'They had to. Nobody wants trouble. You want to use that as much as you can. Always give people a way out and they'll take it, even though they know it's a lie.'

Rupert did not have Paul Poole's spirit of adventure, but his picture of Russia was made a little more garish by Paul's wonderful stories. He did ring Mayevsky, however, and said that he would like to stay in the Metropole or the National Hotel, if that were possible.

'Of course,' Mayevsky told him.

Jo was not so convinced, and after listening to Paul Poole she was anxious to change her mind. She had changed her mind several times already, and it was obvious that she still disliked the idea of going at all. But Rupert had an ally in Rolland, who now wanted to go because he had told his school friends about it. He would therefore be bitterly disappointed now if they went back on their word.

'You're going to the Black Sea?' Paul said finally.

Rupert nodded. 'I want to look at the remains of the Greek colonies along the coast.'

'There are a lot of other things you ought to look at there too,' Paul said mysteriously. 'You ought to see *someone* before you go.'

Rupert knew what an Intelligence man meant by that, and he ignored it.

But he was grateful for the rest of Paul's advice about food and clothing and money. Like most of Rupert's other friends, Paul did not believe the talk about Rupert's security troubles, although they all knew that he had resigned in a huff over it. They believed

that Rupert was right. This thing was always hanging round everybody's neck, probably even the Prime Minister's. Anyway, it was amazing that Rupert had stuck it out for so long in the meteo office, even without this fuss. Phillips-Jones had tried to make a fool of him. Of course he was right to walk out.

'Sometimes I'd like to walk out myself,' Paul said. 'But I couldn't afford to do what you do, Rupert. I haven't got your bank account.'

Chapter Twenty-two

The day before they left for Moscow, Paul Poole called on Rupert and sat in his garden and said enthusiastically, 'I've had a wonderful idea. Listen! If you're out of the meteo office for good, why don't you come in with us? You're absolutely perfect in every way. Don't laugh! I'm telling you. To begin with you're supposed to be under a security ban.' Paul was delighted by that. 'Great Gatsby!' he said and began to tease Fidge the spaniel who had made friends with Paul in an instant. 'That ought to throw everybody off the track. You couldn't have arranged it better. And with all this interest in archaeology, I tell you it's perfect.'

'Perfect for what?' Rupert asked, preferring to be a little stupid with Paul, who always assumed that you knew all the subtleties of the subtle world he lived in.

'You could cover a lot of ground,' Paul went on, dreaming up Rupert's future career with enthusiasm. 'You have that wonderfully light nerve of independence, and you're always a little above it all. You've got the money and the reputation.'

Rupert knew quite well what sort of career Paul meant, and he was not so startled as he might have been if it had been anyone but this man.

'I don't think I'd be much good at it,' he said.

'Oh, nonsense! Honestly. It just came to me as I was getting onto a bus to go home last night, and I could have kicked myself for not thinking about it before. What do you think, Rupert? Mmm?'

Rupert laughed. He liked Paul, it was impossible not to like him. 'I'm not the Intelligence type, you know that.'

'Don't be silly,' Paul argued, which was his usual argument to all resistance. 'This isn't MI5 stuff. This is Navy. Oh, balls to MI5. They're just a sort of jumped-up gendarmerie. No. No. I'm absolutely serious. You're such a good sea type, and I've

spoken to Julie Johnson about you already, and he was enthusiastic too. You could come onto our establishment right away.'

'Is Julie Johnson your department head now?' Rupert asked. He knew Julie from the last days of the mine-laying M.T.B.s when Julie had taken ten men into Dieppe on a mock-up French drifter. He had been captured, had escaped, had done the same thing later, off Cherbourg, and had lost an eye—over which he now wore a picturesque black patch.

'Yes, but anyway it isn't Julie who wants to see you.'

'No? Then who is it?'

Paul loved pulling rabbits out of hats, and he looked boyishly at Rupert and said, 'Your old friend—Admiral J. B. Lille.'

'You mean he's the boss?'

'I thought that would stun you. But that is very private information.'

'I can imagine that!' Rupert said. J. B. Lille had been a close friend of his father's and even more so of his mother's, and Rupert had known him all his life. He was a very shy man with pale ice-blue eyes which were always flirting closely (yet almost affectionately) with embarrassment. He had passed briefly through Rupert's life at regular intervals—when Rupert was a boy, a young man in Athens, and later on in France and England and in the Navy. J. B. Lille had been a Navy staff man since 1926, and all his life had been a good friend of Rupert's without either one of them seeking deliberate contact, or asking what the other was doing.

'Well?' Paul asked. 'Will you come?'

Rupert knew he could hardly refuse, and he was also intrigued. When Paul said he had a Navy vehicle and driver who would take him and bring him back again, he said all right, he'd go.

'Good!' Paul said as they stood up. He was ruffling the ears of the affectionate Fidge, who had fallen in love with him. 'Nice cocker, Rupert. But they've always got ear canker. How old is he?'

'Four.'

'He's nice,' Paul said again. 'Healthy too.'

'Vitamins every morning,' Rupert said, and went in to tell Jo that he was going to the Admiralty with Paul Poole and hoped to be back in a couple of hours.

*

They did not go to the Navy but to a white house along the barracks side of St. James's Park. They walked the last hundred yards from the main park gate and knocked on the door of the house, which was a lovely old Georgian bow-windowed mansion. A maid-servant let them in, and they went up the perfect white staircase to a first-floor landing. In the first room was Julie Johnson with his black eye-patch; and in the next inner room—which was in fact a magnificent library with a bow window overlooking the park—was Admiral J. B. Lille. He was small and silver-haired now, and he crouched for a moment like a shy man. Then he smiled beguilingly and said:

‘Hello, hello, Rupert.’

‘Hello, Admiral,’ Rupert said.

They were very glad to see each other and they shook hands warmly. J. B. Lille pointed to Julie Johnson and said, ‘You remember Johnson, don’t you?’

It was a very warm meeting of old friends.

Through the main door, which was still open, Rupert could see a dozen young women working in another room at grey steel desks which were piled high with books. They looked more like students than the staff of a special branch of Navy Intelligence. The Admiral’s desk was also heaped with books and maps and long folio files and notepaper. One whole side of the room was packed with newspapers and journals and periodicals in foreign languages.

J. B. Lille, Rupert remembered, was a man of many languages and much culture.

They began to talk about how long it was since they had seen each other: almost seven years in the case of J. B. Lille, and eight in the case of Julie Johnson who had taken up fox-hunting in 1950 and had come to Rupert to ask him if he would be interested in sharing a small string of hunting ponies, with maybe some polo thrown in—which Rupert had politely rejected.

‘Did you ever get the ponies?’ Rupert asked him now.

‘Yes, I did,’ Julie said, cocking his head to one side, which was the habit of his one-eyed sight, ‘but they almost broke me. I got four; and then I found that my salary just couldn’t support the little bastards, so I sold the lot for a fraction of what I paid for them.’

Julie was not a rich man, and perhaps he was always a little reserved with Rupert after that, because the rich man had turned him down.

'Go and tell the girl to send in some tea or something,' J. B. Lille said to him. 'And now that you've got Rupert safely here, Paul, you can take all that bound stuff you so carefully sorted out this morning and chuck it all in the incinerator downstairs. I'll give you a shout when we've finished.'

They were dismissed, and J. B. Lille and Rupert were now alone.

'How's your mother?' Rupert was asked.

'Very well, I think. I haven't seen her for a couple of months.'

'I expect she had a bit of a scare when you were left on the ice.'

'She doesn't scare easily. But she came over to stay with Jo.'

'I know. I wanted to see her,' the Admiral said, 'but I was in Montevideo or somewhere at the time. When I read about it down there, I was sure you'd get out of it, even though I couldn't fathom exactly what it was all about. I still don't.'

'It's over and done with now,' Rupert said, and asked about J. B. Lille's shy daughter. Shyness was the Lille mark, and Lille blushed and said, 'Oh, she married a boy who was articled to a solicitor, and now he's thinking of becoming a stockbroker. They have two children.'

Rupert remembered his mother telling him about little Jocelyn Lille and her very shy children. What a line of wonderfully modest human beings, Rupert thought, smiling to himself. He liked them all.

'You sit down,' the Admiral said, 'so that I can walk about. When I sit down I begin to forget what I'm sitting down for. You can't keep your perspective on a really lineal plain when you're sitting in one place all the time. I have to keep wandering out into the park to give my brain a chance.'

'It all seems terribly important,' Rupert commented, looking around him.

'Well,' the Admiral said modestly, 'we may be very important or we may not be. We may never even know.'

Rupert laughed. He knew all the Admiral's levels of understatement.

'No. Seriously,' the Admiral said gently. 'This is rather a new venture. Something quite different, and we may never be able to calculate its true effectiveness.'

'Why? What's so different about it?'

'We'll come to that, Rupert.' The Admiral sat on the chintz window-seat that curved under the bow window where the wide sunlight of the park was beautifully framed in each Georgian pane. 'In the meantime let's talk about you. You know—I was amazed when Paul Poole and Johnson walked in on me yesterday with their suggestion about you. I wonder why I hadn't thought of you myself.'

'That's very nice,' Rupert said.

'Don't be too dry, Rupert,' the Admiral said, because he knew Rupert well enough to detect the distinct shades of taste in his voice. He also knew Rupert well enough to know almost everything important about him—certainly the best of him and the worst of him. 'I mean it,' the Admiral went on. 'You are such an ideal man for us that I'm quite stunned now that I didn't think of you before. But I suppose I thought you'd found your niche, and that was that.'

'I had found my niche,' Rupert said. 'But it fell in on me.'

'So I gather.' The Admiral smiled.

'Anyway,' Rupert said, a little impatient now, 'what do you want me for, Admiral? That is—specifically?'

'Yes, I expect you're pressed for time at the moment. You're leaving tomorrow for the Soviet Union?'

'Yes, on one of their Baltic boats.'

'Fascinating!' the Admiral said. 'You'll be very interested in everything you see there. And you should try to see as much as you possibly can.'

'As a matter of fact I'm only going there to look for some Greek relics on the Black Sea.'

'Yes, I know. But that's only a device, I hope. You ought to try and see everything else as well. It's such an extraordinary country.'

'I don't think I'll have much time for anything else,' Rupert told him. 'Russia is too large and too unwieldy to take it casually.'

The Admiral jumped down from the window-seat. 'Don't call it Russia,' he said quickly to Rupert. 'Call it what they call it

themselves—the Soviet Union or the Ess-ess-ess-air. That's very important, Rupert.'

Rupert waited now, because he knew that the Admiral was getting around to a point, and the point was by no means clear to him yet. This was a branch of Navy Intelligence. Yet it had other airs, and the Admiral was giving it a little of his own modesty and complexity as well.

'You don't know anything about us yet, do you?'

'Not a thing.'

'All right. Let me explain briefly.' The Admiral sat on the window-seat again, his short legs hanging loose. 'To begin with, we *are* Naval Intelligence. You know that much. But what you don't know is that we are a rather new kind of Intelligence. As a matter of act we've been doing it now for about five years, but we've only just recently found the best method of work for what we're trying to achieve.'

Rupert nodded vaguely when the Admiral looked at him for comprehension.

'Oh, we do the usual things too. We spy out the land, we collect the ordinary information. That's easy. In fact it has to be done to keep *all* our irons in the fire. It keeps our left hand in practice, while our right hand explores deeper. And that is exactly what we're doing. We are exploring a little deeper than usual. Are you interested?'

'You make it sound very interesting,' Rupert agreed. 'But I don't know that I'd be of any use to you. My ideas are already supposed to be odd, as you know.'

'That's what makes you so perfect. You are, in fact, the sort of man we badly need. Why? Because you have had enough experience, living so long in other countries, to understand and recognize other people's points of view—their quite different psychology if you like. You see what I'm getting at?'

'National psychology,' Rupert said. 'Something like that.'

'Something like that,' the Admiral confirmed. 'But let me put it to you more personally. As an Intelligence department we certainly want what the others want. But we also want something different, something more, and I'll tell you exactly what it is. You, for instance, are going to the Soviet Union. Very good. When you are there somebody from one of our establishments will ask you

to look for this or that specific item: I think it's radio stations or radar at the moment, I'm not sure which. I can't stop them asking you that, I don't really want to stop them, but that's not really all. What I want you to do, Rupert, is to go there with the mind of a serious diplomatist.'

Rupert got up and stood near the window and watched a gardener in the open park snipping off the tops of small tulips with a pair of glittering shears. Clip! Clip! Their heads came off.

'When you go to the Soviet Union tomorrow,' the Admiral was saying, 'you must begin instantly to look at it as if you were the man in charge of an operation which could decide what we should do in that country. You must therefore think on two levels. Firstly, you must think of what they can do to us; and secondly you must think of what we can do to them.'

'Don't you know that already?' Rupert asked.

'Yes, but only in a very narrow military sense. We are looking for much more than the soldiers want, if you see what I mean.'

'No, not exactly.'

'If you can move about the Soviet Union,' the Admiral said, 'or in any country for that matter, with the mind which is estimating, all the time, what that country means in strategic and psychological terms, and what every experience you have and every person you meet can reflect for you in understanding that country, then you'll be amazed what you begin to uncover. Do you follow?'

'More or less.'

'But you have to have that mind, Rupert! You have to be willing to look at every aspect of their life with this complete and specific calculation in mind—place, people, events, even the children. You have to say to yourself: *If we are ever at war with this country, what exactly should we know about it?* Or even: *If we are to have this country as an ally, exactly what should we know of it?*'

'Which do you mean in this case?' Rupert asked light-heartedly.

'Don't joke,' the Admiral said. 'As a matter of fact communism isn't pleasant, as you well know. Even so, that should not place a limitation on your outlook. You should see everything with the eyes of the soldier, diplomatist, propagandist, raider, Intelligence

agent, and finally as the planner of any operation we may be forced to use against them. Do you follow me?"

'I think so.'

'In this way you will begin to see everything there in a new light, in a completely new way. It becomes a fascinating exercise after a while. In fact, everything you do and see becomes such a part of this *real* Intelligence that you find your interest in the country is stimulated by it, your knowledge of it is enhanced as a result, and of course your usefulness to us increases enormously. So that when you finally make up your reports, we have not simply a narrow military observer at work, we have an analysis which can encompass everything—the psychology of a people towards its government, the attitude of students to their schools, the character of telephone poles across a certain strip of country, the peculiar way they wear their shirts, and even the way they spoil their children. It is everything, because everything is useful. It is Intelligence in the round. It is the way the Renaissance men would have done it, if they had ever needed such a highly organized Intelligence service. Do you follow me?"

'Perfectly. It sounds marvellous,' Rupert said.

The Admiral smiled in the sun. 'I thought you'd appreciate it. So far we are not a very large organization, although we are beginning to make our rather special mark. It may seem odd to you that this is Navy Intelligence. Yet why not? It probably throws everybody off the obvious scent. Anyway, you can see why a person like yourself is so potentially valuable to us. We are unorthodox and so are you. You bring to us, ready-made, everything we could ask of you. You're an independent man, you have the reputation of being rich, although I know you handed your money over to your mother. Anyway, we'll pay you more than you need. You also have technical experience of a sort, and you are interested in wider aspects of life. Archaeology—that's very good, you know. Even your brush with security is useful, because no one will imagine that you're engaged in security yourself. It all adds up very well.'

'And you're offering me a job?' Rupert said.

'Of course.'

'On the strength of my unusual qualities?'

The Admiral blushed for some reason or other and looked shy

again. 'That's right, Rupert. Seriously, though, I know you very well, and I know that this would fascinate you. And I don't mean only in the Soviet Union. There is unlimited scope for you, almost anywhere. Even among our friends and allies this works in exactly the same way. You can go to an allied country with exactly the same mentality and we would benefit just as much. We can discover how our friends think and how we have to behave towards them to get the most out of them. You see the extent of it?'

'It sounds like the old psychological warfare department.'

'No, no, no! Please don't say that. It is nothing at all like that. This is Intelligence in depth. If we do look for national psychology, then that's only an aspect of it. We are not really trying to be machiavellian. We are trying to probe deeper into a national consciousness, as well as dig up the national weaknesses and the national sensibilities. But we also require the usual, objective information—where the roads go to, or how big the ports are, and where the radar sheds lie. We don't separate that kind of information, we relate it to the rest. We need the objective information on the ports just as much, and also with as much understanding of it in human terms, as we need in our understanding of the attitude of the child to its teachers and its parents.'

Rupert understood the books now, the magazines, the journals, the research assistants outside, the kind of functional erudition which J. B. Lille could master in several languages, in several cultures, in many degrees of comprehension of what was now his new department of Intelligence. Even the J.B. part of his name was an old affectation for the scientist rather than the Naval officer.

'You see,' he said with a sudden frank smile, 'you become much more than a spy, Rupert. I know that's what's in your mind. But you go far beyond that silly idea.'

Rupert nodded. He could see the conception, and he could grasp its attraction and its use and its purpose. He could even see himself in it. Yet he was by no means sure so quickly that he was the ideal man for them.

But the Admiral knew his man. 'That's all right,' he said to Rupert. 'Don't hurry into it. What I can do, if you like, is to put you on the establishment for a while and see how it goes.'

'No need to do that,' Rupert said. 'I can think about it without being on your establishment.'

'I was really offering you the money. I suppose you're out of a job?'

'Yes, but I can manage,' Rupert said quickly.

'Just as you say. That's not important anyway. It isn't the money side of it that interests you, I know. It isn't even the job itself that I want you to be interested in. It's the real fascination of it that I'd like to have from you. Only those men who are deeply intrigued, and who see the profound importance of this concept, will be of any use to us. That's all I want from you. And if you're the man I know you are, then I think I can depend on your interest and your fascination. What do you say?'

'You know I have peculiar ideas about work, Admiral.'

'I don't mind them,' the Admiral replied.

'I've always felt that work ought to be worth while. A man ought to function usefully.'

'Of course. But isn't this useful? In this job you'd be drawing on every level of talent you have, and on all your resources. And not just once and for all, but all the time. All the time!' he emphasized.

'Perhaps,' Rupert argued doubtfully. 'But what's the real point of it?'

Admiral Lille nodded shyly. He understood the real question, and he walked among the book-lined walls thinking.

'You know,' he said finally, 'I could be simple-minded and admit that the point of this kind of Intelligence work is the preparation by one country to annihilate another. In this day and age that is what a war will mean. All right, let us admit it. That's probably what's in your mind. But where does this perspective begin and end, I ask you. Is any man in this country who works in a factory or who goes to a university or who teaches physics to bright young men—is any one of them outside the same process? The world now is in a contest of societies and systems, let's face it. Everything we do is part of the contest, no matter what it is. It is us against them; our way against their way. It is becoming increasingly hard, therefore, to separate the general character of a society from the nature of the contest itself, or even from the individual in it. Our work is therefore only an extension of the inevitable—of the process of society itself. Can you agree with that?'

Rupert hesitated, but he nodded slowly. 'I think so. The cold war is real enough, I know that.'

'Take your own work. Almost all of your meteorological work had military importance, particularly your last job in the Arctic. High-atmosphere and high-latitude investigations are of greatest importance to atomic fall-out.'

'That's true.'

'Did that bother you? Did you think that unconstructive?'

'Not at all. Maybe it *is* part of the process of society itself. I accept that. I'm not a fool, and I'm not a pacifist; and I'm not a political idiot. I know how acute the contest is.'

'Then you can see my point when I say that we here are simply an extreme extension of our society, and of what it is trying to do —which is to survive.'

'I'm not arguing with the social value of Intelligence work,' Rupert said. 'It's necessary. But that doesn't mean that I want to be part of it.'

'Why not?'

'I'm not quite sure. Nobody likes to be a spy. It is simple in a war, but it is unpleasant in peace-time.'

'But this is *not* peace-time. Don't you see that? Furthermore, it will give you everything you are looking for. If you come in with us you can function as a very independent man. I know I can trust your judgment, and you really can use all your genuine resources. You can even extend your natural talents. In fact for the first time you could probably make yourself a really usefully functional person.'

Rupert laughed now. 'You're making it too attractive. Don't overdo it.'

'No. It's the truth. It *is* attractive. It's the most fascinating job a man could ask for. There are very few restrictions, the area of study is unlimited, the work is never done. But I tell you, Rupert, that once you begin to look at a people or a nation with these eyes, with these sensitive strategic nerves, you'll never go back. Everything else will seem dull, and you will begin to see a country, even your own, in a different light. Your awareness is heightened enormously. I tell you it's a marvellous, functional, intellectual task.'

'I believe you,' Rupert said. 'But I don't think I could be a very efficient spy.'

‘How do you know you can’t, unless you try?’

‘I’d need to think about it a bit more,’ Rupert told him.

‘Then let’s say we have a tentative agreement,’ the Admiral said to him.

‘Don’t try to pin me down,’ Rupert replied. ‘I think it’s better if we say I’ll wait and see. Let me try it out first.’

‘Nevertheless, it is a tentative agreement, surely?’

‘All right. I shan’t quibble about that.’

‘And if one of our young men approaches you when you’re in Moscow and asks you for something specific, give him a fair hearing. Everything is important.’

‘I’ll do what I can,’ Rupert said offhandedly.

‘Good. It’s very nice to have you with us, Rupert.’

Rupert wondered just how much of him they did have, but he could not help admiring J. B. Lille’s conviction in what he wanted, in what he was doing, in what he foresaw, in what he was asking of Rupert Royce. It was J. B. Lille’s way. The world seemed no bigger than his book-lined walls, but Rupert was surprised, when he eventually went outside after drinking tea and talking about their respective families, to find that the excitement of J. B. Lille’s world stayed with him, even as he walked through the park.

It might very well be a fascinating idea after all.

PART THREE

Chapter Twenty-three

They left London from the Surrey Commercial Docks on a white Russian electric turbine ship, the *Baltika*, and below as they backed out of the dock, Mayevsky shouted out long farewells in and out of the gay martial music broadcast by the ship's radio system. Jo held a big bunch of summer flowers which Mayevsky had given her, and she looked at the Russian sailors and the Russian officers and Russian stewardesses with caution and suspicion, wondering if they could manage this boat efficiently. The sailors looked all right, they always did, but the officers did not look very much like English officers. They were too casual—not in English ways, but in their own rather uninterested way. The stewardesses were all very motherly.

Jo knew she would never gain confidence.

'It's so old-fashioned,' she said, because the bunks were surrounded with green plush curtains. They had three staterooms, and everybody on the ship treated Rupert with deference and interest. They had brought Angelina, a final necessity for Jo, and she slept with the children in a three-berth cabin. Jo and Rupert had a cabin to themselves, and there was an extra cabin: 'In case Mr. Royce would like to rest,' the purser said.

They were not like French, Italian, American or English seamen and stewards, Jo decided, and though the ship was silent and seemed to run itself once they were at sea, she couldn't relax.

'But it's such a pretty little ship,' Rupert assured her. 'She was built in Holland, and they obviously look after her.'

'But something seems to be missing,' Jo argued.

They passed Copenhagen on a Sunday, and the green spires and low beaches and red-roofed houses and small yachts and Esso tanks looked so European and so comfortable that Jo almost wept, because this would be the last they would see of Europe. They passed red lights at night, many, many Baltic ships, a sister

ship, Russian trawlers and the little blunt-ended Baltic timber boats. It was a friendly sea, grey, flat, intimate, northern. But when Jo saw the Leningrad docks—clean and organized but somehow rough and not straight and not beautiful and not painted—she gripped Rupert's sleeve.

'It looks so grim,' she whispered.

Men without ties waited for them, stocky women in blue wide-shouldered suits and working-class shoes and short socks were frowning upwards. The Russian women on the boat began to wave and call in Russian to the shore, and their happy high-pitched voices and Russian words sounded like a release for them from another world. They were home at last, liberated from a strange and alien atmosphere. But Jo looked down on it through the martial music and knew already that she was not going to like it.

'It reminds me of the war,' she told Rupert.

Alexei Vodopyanov and his wife, and four curious men in long straight grey raincoats, were waiting for them on the Leningradskaya Station in Moscow. Rupert had already seen everything he thought about Russia confirmed and yet contradicted; and it was proving very easy to think in the way J. B. Lille wanted him to think. He could admit its fascination already.

But he was very pleased to see Alexei who shouted a tremendous greeting, staggering with difficulty a few steps towards them on stiff and almost useless legs. He embraced Rupert with rough cheeks, laughing as if this was the happiest and greatest day of his life. Rupert withdrew. Alexei embraced him again and hugged him and said again and again, 'Rupert, eh! Rupert . . . *nu, nu, nu!*'

'Hello, Alexei,' he said at last.

In a moment they stood looking at each other, and Rupert was amazed to see how stocky and small Alexei was. Then he realized that he had never before seen the Russian standing up. His big broad face and mass of black unruly hair and his hearty arms and shoulders were a comparatively healthy Alexei, bubbling with ego and friendship and with heroism. He wore two golden stars pinned on his coat lapel, and Rupert wondered why he had two of them.

Alexei had forgotten all the others, looking into Rupert's eyes and demanding some selfish response, some complete acknowledgement of their unique friendship; but Rupert was very aware of the need for introductions. Jo and the children and Angelina and Alexei's wife and the silent friends were waiting.

'Jo,' Rupert said hurriedly, holding her arm. 'This is Alexei Vodopyanov.'

Alexei took a difficult step forward. Rupert saw Jo panic and shrink back as if she were afraid of suffering the same embrace, but Alexei took her hand and said, 'How do you do! Ah . . .' he cried suddenly. 'Here are your children, Rupert. Nina,' he said and turned to his wife.

Rupert glanced quickly at Nina Vodopyanov and saw a slight, autumnal, old-fashioned, handsome young woman who had been inspecting him frankly so that Rupert suddenly felt embarrassed. When he shook hands with her he was aware of her unfeminine way of doing it, and of her face which did not shrink into femininity at all.

'I am pleased to meet you,' she said seriously, but with a hint of excitement. She tried to embrace the children, and she gave Jo a large bunch of chrysanthemums.

'*Nu!*' Alexei shouted, and swung around as if he had suddenly awakened to his responsibilities. 'My friends. Sasha,' he cried, and a large gentleman stepped forward. Alexei broke into Russian and then put his arm around Sasha and said in English, 'He is my friend, Rupert. He is an old pilot from our Ministry—Alexander Sergeivitch Nekrassov. Boris!' he cried again and had another Russian in his arm. 'This is also an old pilot, not from our Ministry, but still a pilot: Boris Leontovitch Gorski. And there is another big friend, Rupert, a famous man in the Arctic with Schmidt on the ice-floes and everywhere. He's another Boris—Boris Apollonovitch Orzhinokovsky . . .'

Rupert shook two serious hands three times, and then the third hand, and he felt them all concentrated on him. They took their hats off and bowed over Jo's hand, and Rupert said sharply to Rolland: 'Rolland, shake hands!' as if the boy had been neglecting an important ceremony.

'So!' Alexei said. 'Let's go.'

'The luggage . . .' Rupert began.

‘He’ll look for it,’ Alexei said and pointed to a thin Russian with a Russian cigarette squashed in the middle clenched between his teeth. ‘Come,’ Alexei said, and began to stumble slowly forward on his stiff, fragile legs, gripping Rupert with an iron fist under one arm, and taking Boris or Sasha or the other Boris with the other hand.

‘How are you, Alexei?’ Rupert asked politely.

‘I came all the way from the Black Sea to meet you,’ Alexei told him, squeezing his arm.

‘Is that so?’

‘We will be together at the Black Sea,’ Alexei said happily.

‘That’s nice,’ Rupert murmured.

They struggled a few more feet and Alexei was already sweating with the effort, and his big broad face was a mass of tight, muscular lines. They had to stop.

‘Nina!’ Alexei shouted. ‘Where are all the flowers?’

They all had flowers. Rupert was aware that he gripped a bunch of small white snapdragons in his right hand and had no memory of how they got there. He turned around. Jo had flowers, Angelina had flowers, the children had them, and Nina (who was holding Rolland by the hand, while Tess held Angelina’s) was holding a bunch of pink carnations. She reprimanded her husband gently in Russian and said: ‘Alexei! You should wait here. We can get the car nearer . . .’

‘*Nyet!*’ Alexei told her. But he looked secretly at his wife for a moment, as if appealing for her permission to go on. ‘All right (*laadno*)!’ she said to him.

‘Then let’s go!’ Alexei said again. But before he could move, a small man in a Russian air-force uniform with blue shoulder tabs approached Alexei and said heartily: ‘Alexei Alexeivitch . . .’ and after they shook hands and exchanged some greetings in Russian, the stranger stood back, obviously waiting to be introduced to Rupert.

Alexei ignored him and then gripped Rupert’s arm again and also Boris’s, and said without any embarrassment or hurry, ‘*En avant, mes amis!*’

Chapter Twenty-four

Rupert would always argue with Jo about Moscow because they disliked it for different reasons and in different ways. Their first view of Soviet Russia was not what Rupert had expected, yet its harsh effect on him was (he decided) easy to understand. It irritated him and made him feel like escaping immediately. To Jo, expecting the worst, it was far beyond the worst.

They stayed in Moscow for two days. The Metropole Hotel was everything Paul Poole had said it would be—you could scrape the atmosphere of old Russia off the walls. It was old, decrepit, and standing stone-still; it was dead from a dead world. But who were all those people who thrived in it, who ran it or lived in it or passed the time of day in it? Strange old women shuffled about the corridors with kerchiefs on their heads; women administrators in blue suits administered the bottom, the top, and each of the floors. Stout-hearted girls in silk dresses stamped about the corridors in their solid shoes. The men had gold teeth and big trousers and brown shoes, and the meals were cold and hard to get and the hours passed in waiting, waiting; and their bedroom lavatory did not work.

But Moscow, with Alexei Vodopyanov, was not what Rupert had wanted.

Alexei said happily that he would see them every day and all day. That was obviously a Russian way of showing you that they cared about you. When Rupert protested, Alexei took it as a consideration for his own physical difficulties and said: 'No, no, Rupert. I will come everywhere with you.'

Rupert found himself shrinking, like Jo, from the contact. It wasn't Alexei he was shrinking from, but the vivid air Alexei took with him. He stumbled about painfully on his stiff legs, and his golden stars tinkled musically on his coat lapel. When they stood on the black lake of cobblestones and looked at the wide

open spaces of the Red Square, which lapped up to the red-brick wall of the Kremlin and then disappeared beyond the crazy church to the river, Vodopyanov was surrounded in a few moments by admiring strangers who recognized him and recognized Rupert; and Rupert discovered that he was well known in Russia already.

'The *angliski gero*,' they said. 'Rupairt Royiss,' they said. 'He is the English pilot who saved Vodopyanov at the pole.'

'See,' Vodopyanov laughed. 'You are a real Soviet hero. Everybody knows you.'

Alexei, with generous largesse, would not only talk to anyone who approached him like this as a famous man, but he enjoyed embracing Rupert into this tremendous world where men slapped him on the back and shook his hand and said seriously: 'Good luck, Tovarish Royce.' 'Let me shake the hand of a good friend and gentleman from England.' An old man with one leg said, 'He looks like a Finn to me.'

Within a few hours, Rupert was shrinking at the approach of anyone when he was with Alexei, and though he was too polite to do anything but respond calmly and properly to their hand-shakes and to their greetings and announcements of friendship, he said to Jo at the end of the day:

'This is going to be difficult. They take this hero business very seriously.'

Jo agreed that it was going to be awful. She had spent the day with Nina Vodopyanov, and said she couldn't stand the woman. She had already fallen foul of Nina, who had tried, with Russian enthusiasm, to interest Jo in the beauties of Moscow, which Jo failed to appreciate. She had tried to interest Jo in the art galleries and museums and in the agricultural exhibitions of the city.

'I hate museums,' Jo had told her.

'But our Tretyakov is famous all over the world,' Nina argued.

'I've never even heard of it,' Jo said.

Nina was amazed, and a little subdued.

When they had been waiting to cross one of the main roads on foot, Nina told Jo that they could cross when the lights were green.

'You don't have to tell me that,' Jo cried. 'Do you think we don't have traffic lights in England?'

'I didn't know whether yours were the same system as ours,' Nina told her.

Jo allowed herself to be taken to the Lenin Museum, but after one or two rooms of it she insisted on leaving.

'It's bad for the children,' Jo said to Nina. 'It's only propaganda.'

'Lenin was a great man everywhere!' Nina argued a little angrily.

'I suppose he is to you,' Jo said, 'but I don't think he's supposed to mean anything like that to my children.'

They had argued then about the drabness of people ('But how can you say that we are drab?' Nina argued. 'Everybody has enough clothing, even if they don't dress like western Europeans'), the women sweeping the streets ('But our women work,' Nina protested), and the drink-dispensing machines which offered a common glass for all who used them—for which Nina Vodopaynov had no defence at all. She had already lost the means of effectively replying to Jo's comments politely, because Jo's ideas came off the top of her mind and were not meant to hurt or go deep. But how could you answer them? They seemed to have hurt Nina Vodopaynov, because she was more and more in retreat. At the end of the day she was already cautious and even reluctant to make any sort of claims for Moscow or for her people or her city or her society. Jo had easily subdued her.

'It's not only that they're drab,' Jo said now to Rupert as she undressed tiredly to go to bed. 'It's a sort of uniform of drabness. No wonder we hate communism. I wonder what it must have been like here before communism. It couldn't have been worse. Did you see those old women sweeping the streets, and the way all the women just bundle up?'

He had seen what she had seen; but the people had not bothered him as much as the open sparseness of the city itself. There were green squares, some lovely tree-lined avenues and boulevards, but the wide, valley-like streets and heavy monumental buildings were not intimate or friendly or even likeable. He supposed he was being too English, demanding intimacy of a new city. He supposed that this solidity was a compromise with the harsh northern climate, or with the brusque character of these northern people. But the new university, which should have

impressed him, made him think of a giant architectural pile already waiting to be abandoned, inevitably, as a record of what earth-bound imaginations could dream up. If this was their idea of Utopia, then his idea of it would definitely be its opposite. If he had an ideal of his own, the buildings in it would be light and almost winged, as inseparable as possible from the air and the open sky and the natural surroundings, and divided off only by the thinnest line of temperature and comfort and protection, the thinner the line the better it would be.

‘You like it?’ Alexei said proudly as they peered up at the high stepped towers.

‘Very nice,’ Rupert replied politely.

‘Thirty thousand students,’ Alexei told him.

‘I can imagine it,’ Rupert said.

‘You want to go in and look?’

‘No, no,’ Rupert said quickly. He reminded himself that he had come here to see the ancient ruins of Greek colonies on the Black Sea, not the inside of their modern universities. He had not come to Russia to be impressed, even for J. B. Lille’s requirements; although he felt the temptation.

‘Then let’s go, Rupert,’ Alexei said, gripping his arm again.

Rupert winced. Alexei’s iron grip left very little room for human doubt.

*

The next morning, before they had recovered from the day before, Alexei came to join them for breakfast in the Metropole restaurant where they waited over an hour for two cold, soft-boiled eggs. While they waited, Alexei told Jo about life. It was mainly his life with Rupert on the ice-floc, and how he would be dead if Rupert had not been a very determined and brave man.

‘Life’s very lucky. You see?’ he said, turning affectionately to Rupert for confirmation. ‘It was worth while, wasn’t it? Look! How wonderful it is for all of us to be sitting here in Moscow.’

Jo only half-listened because she became so angry waiting for the food to arrive that she slapped Tess hard for complaining. Tess did not cry, but she knew she had been wronged and she looked at her father. Rupert shook his head gently to say ‘*Never mind.*’ Tess had been complaining last night of a stomach-ache, but Tess had stomach-aches whenever she wanted attention.

'Today,' Alexei announced, unaware of family atmosphere, 'you will be given your medal, Rupert. At twelve o'clock we must be in the Kremlin. You must wear your best suit. And also Mrs. Rupert.'

'You mean I must also wear my best dress?' Jo asked him cynically, suddenly catching up with Alexei's good nature.

'Ah yes,' he said and laughed. 'You must come.'

'Where is your wife today?' Rupert asked him hurriedly to sabotage Jo's intentions.

'She is at our institute. And my aunt is at home preparing our big lunch. Today you lunch at us. After your medal, we celebrate . . .'

'What about the children?' Jo asked. She obviously wanted to get out of it.

'But the children too,' Alexei told her.

Rupert swallowed a mouthful of cold, half-raw egg and gave up. He decided he would hereafter remain hungry in this new socialist world.

It was Sunday, and they spent what was left of the morning looking at the Moscow department stores. A woman knocked Jo down as they walked into the Mosstorg, which was opposite the Bolshoi Theatre. Jo was used to the mutual weaving in and out of rude London crowds; but a rude Moscow crowd did not weave at all, and Jo had met a woman who refused to weave and so they had crashed head-on. Jo picked herself up, and Rupert brushed her down, while Alexei groaned in dismay.

'Please be careful,' he said to her. 'Rupert, you must take her arm.'

Rupert took Jo's arm, and together they were swept into the store in the vanguard of a spearhead of Muscovites. They were almost swept right through and out again before they realized what was happening. This packed-in, jostling crowd behaved as if it was normal to be crushed to death. The feeling of hard-pressed humanity and the sound of a thousand shuffling feet on stone floor and on creaking wooden stairs deafened them as they tried to keep upright against the surge.

'Can't we get out of this?' Jo cried, clinging to Rupert, trying to cling to Tess, while Angelina held Rolland. 'They'll kill the children.'

'Bad day,' Alexei cried, obviously in pain as his lurching steps cut a path for them. 'Everybody shops today.'

His words were lost, because they lost contact with each other. Jo, panicking, called to Rolland and Angelina to follow and not to get out of sight, to be careful for God's sake.

Rupert, fighting to keep up with them lost them and then got into the stream of outgoing people and allowed them to elbow, push, squeeze and carry him along until he burst out of the doors like a cork out of a bottle. Jo was standing in the middle of the road with dishevelled hair and a grip on Tess.

'But they're savages!' she cried wildly.

At noon, Rupert was presented with his medal in a white and pale-blue office in the Kremlin, where the President of the Soviet Union, whose name Rupert did not know, told him in Russian that he was a very brave man, and that the Soviet Union liked to honour men with his wonderful courage.

'Men will always endure when there is something to endure for,' he said to Rupert with his dark brown eyes concentrated on pinning the medal to the grey lapel. 'And it's not only your wives and children you are thinking of, but your fellow-man.'

He smiled politely, inspected Rupert for a second, then decided suddenly to kiss him on both cheeks and shake his hand. Then he gave Rupert a slip of paper and said, with a smile, 'This too.'

Rupert did not look at the paper but he could tell from the way it was done that it was a cheque of some kind, and he almost withdrew his hand.

'*Pojalusta!*' the President insisted. 'It is usual.'

Rupert blushed and took it and pushed it quickly and hatefully into his pocket.

They shook hands again and Alexei and several other unknown men shook his hand and the President gave Jo a bunch of flowers and the children a package each.

'What's in it?' Tess asked Alexei in a whisper.

'Big surprise,' Alexei whispered in reply.

They stood together awkwardly, and a man with a camera who had been taking pictures now lined them up in a group and took another one, then said, '*Ishaw raz!*' and took another. Then they

said goodbye formally to the President and walked along the high creamy creaking corridors of the palace to the sun outside—a Russian summer sun shining softly on the golden onion domes of the Kremlin churches. They stopped while Alexei admired it, but Rupert was already wondering when he could decently take this shining golden star off his coat lapel, and when he could get rid of the money which he had folded up and pushed deep into his coat pocket.

*

The Vodopyanovs lived near the old airport, and the Ministry's limousine stopped in the sandy courtyard where five or six men in shirt sleeves were playing Sunday dominoes at a wooden table near a big tin mushroom. A slight shower made them hurry the game, and they began slapping down one domino after the other and shouting gaily to each other as they got up, and finally they all snatched the dominoes and ran for cover as the rain came down heavily.

'Cowards,' Alexei shouted to them.

They joined Alexei and Rupert and family on the stairs which were clean but battered, and Alexei said proudly of them, as they crowded noisily up the steps, 'Pilots! That one,' he said to Rupert and pointed to a small grey-haired man, 'has flown all over the Antarctic. He knows the English there. He and I are good friends.'

Rupert had realized by now that he was moving in an Arctic pilots' world and Alexei was very well known and liked in it. Some of them shook Rupert's hand, some of them joked; all were respectful and all of them inspected him frankly, like men who only recognized their equals and nobody else.

Upstairs they crowded into a small flat, so tight that it was hard to distinguish the shape of the place; but they sat down in a small library or sitting-room or bedroom, and Nina Vodopyanov, dressed in a brown silk dress, greeted them with the same sort of equality as the pilots. But she seemed very hesitant now, and watchful too. She was so frail-looking, so strangely dressed, and yet so self-contained that she did not have a specially feminine way about her, which already bothered Rupert as it did Jo, and he felt sorry for her and decided to warn Jo not to persecute her, even unintentionally.

Nina said that she had brought their ten-year-old nephew to play with Rolland and Tess. 'Seriozha!' she said. He was a pale, handsome boy with the same transparent skin as Nina's: the frost-bitten cheeks, the Russian eyes and Russian chin and Russian cheekbones and Russian equality. Nina always used names as expletives: 'Alexei!' 'Tess!' 'Rolland!' 'Totya!' (Aunt), and she usually began her sentences with one or the other. 'Masha!' she said now to the old servant. 'Bring the drinks, please!' Jo she called nothing at all. She seemed suspicious of Jo now.

Nina tried to introduce Alexei's aunt formally, but Alexei put his arm around the old peasant woman and hugged her and said: 'I used to run away from her, and she'd beat me . . .' He translated what he had said for her, and she smiled with her old Russian face and said: 'Why do you say such things to your guests, Alexei? They'll believe you!' Alexei shouted after her as she hurried back to the kitchen: 'But it's true. You know it's true . . .'

Alexei had struggled up the stairs painfully, and now he struggled to arrange vodka and drinks for them, and Tess clung to Jo and Angelina, sitting on a divan, while Rolland went off with Seriozha to the balcony where they began taking photographs of each other. Masha, the old servant who wore thick black stockings, brought in small hot cakes. Jo was offered a lemonade or a muscat or a *portvein*, but she said quickly: 'No, no! I need a vodka,' and when Alexei slashed glasses with Rupert they all drained the hot white cloud and said: 'Ahhhh!'

'Another?'

'No thanks.'

Alexei had poured it out anyway, and when Tess whispered to her mother that she wanted the bathroom, Jo looked worried because she doubted if they had a lavatory in the flat. She asked in a whisper: 'Can't you wait?' Tess shook her head, and Jo looked helplessly at Rupert. But Nina Vodopyanov had watched it closely. She glanced with keen resentment at Jo and then said: 'Tess. You come with me.' And she went out with Angelina and Tess.

'You like Russia, Rupert?' Alexei asked as if they had not been together or near each other for some time.

'Yes,' Rupert replied. 'Very interesting . . .'

'You will see much more; oh, much more. Everything you like.'

Alexei's aunt watched them for a moment, admiring the children and Jo, and then said something in Russian to Alexei, and he said: 'Now, let us go and eat. Ah, Rupert,' he groaned struggling to his feet again, 'do you remember our last days on the ice? I can hardly remember them—except eating that bird raw and coughing over the feathers. I thought they would kill me.'

He laughed and swayed for a moment. He paled and closed his mouth tight and gripped the table; but then it passed, and Rupert guessed that it was not the memory of raw birds that shook him, but the excess of physical effort which Alexei was spending, presumably in Rupert's honour.

'You should sit down.' It was Nina, returning and telling her husband softly: 'And you should not drink vodka. Please, Alexei.'

'Ah, *nichero!*' he whispered to her, unbothered by such unimportant considerations.

*

They crowded around a packed table in the next room. It was stacked to the edges with breads, cakes, fruits, wines, biscuits, bowls of sauces, jars of caviar, plates of fish and cold meat, tomatoes and cucumbers and peppers and Russian salads. Rupert was amazed to see so much food. Alexei's aunt spread her arms and said: 'Guests! Please start,' and they began the meal. Rupert liked caviar, and when Alexei's aunt put a large spoonful on his plate and then another, he held her hand to stop a third. Jo resisted the caviar, but Nina put it on her plate with huge slices of salmon and white fish with horseradish sauce and cold meat; and Alexei filled up the vodka glasses and stood up and began a toast.

'Dear friends,' he said seriously, 'this is a very happy day. I wanted Rupert in my own home in Moscow, so that I could thank him myself for saving my life. Nina?' he turned to his wife. 'Isn't that so?'

'Oh yes!' she said very seriously. 'That's true.'

'You will be my friend for life, Rupert, no matter what happens! I drink to you and to your beautiful family and to our friendship, for ever.'

He had stumbled stiff-legged behind the tightly packed chairs to where Rupert was sitting, and he put his arm around Rupert and then clashed glasses with him and drank and said: 'Ahhh . . .'

Rupert said nothing, and his face did not change its expression.

'Now eat,' Alexei ordered. 'Nina,' he said to his wife. 'Some salmon for Tess. Eh? You like fish, Tess? Ah, your father and I would have given anything for fish once, eh, Rupert? And Mrs. Rupert? You must eat caviar. That's Russian! You like vodka so you must like caviar. Have some more. Eat!'

They began to feel better, and Jo (her face a little flushed) began to be deliberately nice to Nina Vodopyanov, talking to her in a rather loud and clanging and cheerful voice, which seemed to further subdue Nina, who concentrated on helping the children to bread and olives and sliced raw onions and pickled cucumbers.

Rupert and Alexei were now exchanging frequent toasts. They exchanged words, they drank, gasped, and then they attacked the food. Rupert was forced by his good manners to rise to his feet and propose a more formal toast to Alexei and his wife and his aunt and to their kind welcome. Alexei replied again (while they ate large bowls of hot cabbage soup) with a toast to friendship of Britain and the Ess-ess-ess-air, which they all drank several times, and each time it burned hotter and hotter. Jo began to feel her eyes bulging, so she stopped drinking vodka because she could not control Tess who was fidgeting and wanting to go outside. Jo asked for orange juice. 'Only apple juice,' Nina said defensively and poured it out of a big demi-john.

'Ah well, Rupert,' Alexei cried at the top of his voice. 'To our friendship, eh?'

'Yes, to friendship,' Rupert said, still calm.

They finished two more toasts with the soup, and Angelina, who had been sitting between the children, eating nothing and doing nothing, now got up and went into the kitchen. They could hear her talking Italian to Masha the old Russian servant, who replied in Russian. Nina Vodopyanov called her and began to argue with her in English, telling her that she must sit down.

'Why?' Angelina said. 'I prefer to work, Signora. I can't sit down and let someone else wait on me. Not possible.'

'But you're our guest, Angelina.'

'That's for them!' Angelina said and pointed with some

contempt at Jo and Rupert, who nevertheless had brought her with them because Tess was not very well.

'Let her do it,' Rupert told Nina Vodopyanov. 'She'll be happier that way. But they won't understand what you're saying,' he warned Angelina, 'so be careful.'

'No talk necessary,' Angelina said in English and went into the kitchen and returned in a few moments with a plate of hot cakes as if it had all been arranged.

Nina Vodopyanov seemed embarrassed, because the situation had been taken out of her hands, first by Angelina and then by Rupert. She shrank a little deeper into her shoulders, and Rupert was astonished that this was the same woman who had spoken to him so forcefully on the phone to London.

But they ate the hot cakes, and two or three more toasts followed, and Rupert noticed that Rolland and Seriozha were talking. But in what language? How fascinating. Nina, who drank only apple juice, was telling Tess something with great concentration, and then (as if to avoid Jo) she began to show Tess how to undo the *matreosha* dolls which the President had given her. Tess undid one wooden doll from inside another until the last one was a tiny plump peasant.

'Look!' she cried.

Alexei cheered, and said *Ahhh!* interrupting his story to Rupert of what had happened to him in the American hospital and how much English he had learned there. His accent was now thoroughly American. 'Here is salted beef,' he said as his aunt placed a big plate of meat at the end of the table near Nina, and Angelina brought in another two plates of vegetables.

'But it's impossible to eat any more,' Jo said.

'You must eat this,' Alexei insisted, and they drank again.

They began to eat the meat which Nina and the old servant dished out, and Alexei crashed glasses with Rupert again and again, saying: 'To peace and friendship . . .'

'Yes,' Rupert said, the heat flowing up to his head through his neck and his throat now. 'To peace and friendship.'

A little later: 'To your little country. Not so, Rupert? To all those men who fight for peace in your little country. *Ahhh!*'

'Yes, to that,' Rupert said calmly and drank again, eating a piece of the hot boiled beef with a little horseradish sauce.

‘You’re a good friend of our country,’ Alexei said with his glass up.

Rupert raised his glass, and said nothing.

They went on eating and drinking, and Alexei said: ‘To the calm English! They are very calm. Look at Rupert. You like the Russians, Rupert?’

‘Of course.’

‘We must drink to both of us.’

They drank again, and Alexei proposed again their friendship, and Rupert knew now what Alexei was waiting for. But he wouldn’t do it. Alexei wanted him to get up and make one of these elaborate toasts to his own feeling of friendship for the Soviet Union, but Rupert did not believe in it at all. He could not claim to be a great friend of this country. He was, in fact, not a friend at all. He could not toast a lie like that. He was a friend of Alexei’s and he kept toasting Alexei and his family and his pilot friends and his hospitality, but never that general all-over world for a toast which was so important to Alexei. To the great Soviet Union? Ah no! They drank on, and Rupert put his hand in his pocket and then zipped it out again.

That cheque! Cursed money! He had almost forgotten it.

He could see Jo looking at him suspiciously now, and she leaned over and said, ‘You’re not in a fit state to be drinking that stuff either. You must have consumed bottles of it. You’re getting drunk.’

He knew. He felt hot and cold and partly elated and partly dead-calm and partly happy and partly sad. An extraordinary drink, vodka, but it hadn’t done to him what it did to Alexei, which was to make him more happy and boisterous and full of comradeship and fellowship. Ah no . . .

‘To your visit to our country. You will like it, Rupert,’ Alexei was saying again, and expounding hopefully on that.

But Rupert would not relent. His hand crept back into his pocket. He was flushed, and he was beginning to resent that money in his pocket. Why had they had to give him money like that? What a stupid thing to do.

‘To London,’ Alexei was saying.

‘Yes, of course,’ Rupert said morosely and drank to it, but did not volunteer Moscow. He was becoming more stubborn, and he

could see Nina Vodopyanov inspecting him with her silent brown eyes—frankly and a little sadly. He knew he had disappointed her in some way. Were all Russian women like that? Were they so equal and so unfeminine? He blushed at the thought. 'I'm a prude at heart,' he told himself, looking at her and trying to see something that would excite him. All he saw was a lovely-enough face, but the egalitarian eyes cancelled it out. Women should always be feminine, he decided. Like Jo! Their eyes should always admit you to something of themselves, secretly.

'To the children of your country and mine,' Alexei shouted finally.

'Yes, to the children!' Rupert shouted back aggressively and drank again.

Alexei then gave up. With a small shrug of resignation and then a tremendous burst of laughter, he said: 'Rupert, you are English. You are the same. You are the same man as on the ice. You are really like that. How English . . .' he said to Jo. 'He is very English. I am very Russian. Well, anyway—we are good friends for ever,' he said and staggered on his stiff legs to Rupert's chair and embraced Rupert and chair together and then lifted them up for a second and put them down and then stood up straight and pulled Rolland's hair and said, 'I love the English. What a lovely calm people. Very calm!'

He laughed again as he sat down and he toasted the children again, but this time a little sadly as if there was a gap in this miraculous harmony somewhere. The meal ended then with Rupert still feeling stubborn, still refusing this warm, hot, strange, hearty and complete world which Alexei was offering him.

'No! It's not for me,' Rupert was telling himself as they said goodbye, and left Nina and Alexei and Seriozha and Alexei's aunt and Masha the servant with a tremendous pile of dirty dishes.

Chapter Twenty-five

Rupert managed to walk quite well, but he was still full of the contradictions of vodka, and still heady with his hot and exaggerated resentment about the money in his pocket which kept turning up his outraged sensibilities and making a fuss. They had come back to the Metropole Hotel at five o'clock, and a young Englishman was waiting on their floor to see him.

'I'm a friend of Paul Poole's,' he told Rupert seriously. 'Could you possibly come out for a short walk?'

'Now?'

'Yes. It's rather urgent.'

Rupert was carrying Tess—she had a stomach-ache again—so he put her down and studied this young Englishman carefully through hot eyes. He looked like a very intent student, he wore glasses and a tweed jacket and had a mop of loose hair; he was the kind of youth you could see anywhere along the corridors of an English science college or a physics department.

'You people always like to go for walks,' Rupert said loudly.

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, never mind. All right. Let's go.'

'There are some gardens . . .'

'Ah no!' Rupert groaned, but then he laughed because this serious young man would never see any humour in this situation.

'Okay,' Rupert said. 'To the gardens. What's your name?'

'Coleman. Michael Coleman.'

'All right, Coleman. I'm with you,' Rupert said with elaborate determination. He told Tess to tell her mother that he would not be long, and he walked carefully down the old carpeted stairway with Coleman, feeling as if he had been born in Moscow and had already lived in this old hotel for years.

'Have you been here long?' Rupert asked the boy as they walked through the wide crowded streets.

‘Not long.’

‘Are you a student?’

‘In a way.’

They walked on silently, determinedly. Coleman was not going to give away anything until he reached the gardens, and Rupert laughed to himself, remembering Oleg Hansen, the American in London. What a wonderful training. How marvellous for the parks of the world.

It was still Sunday. The Moscow crowds bumped them along the footpath, across the wide road, across the very throat of the Red Square, and into the park where a winding crocodile of people—a mile long in its twists and turns—waited to see the figures of Lenin and Stalin in their mausoleum.

‘Why do they do it?’ Rupert asked Coleman, in a whisper. ‘Is it as fascinating as it looks?’

‘The Russians are a peasant people,’ Coleman explained seriously, lifting his eyebrows a little to relieve the pressure of the spectacles on the bridge of his nose. ‘They always need effigies or ikons or godheads, even dead ones. Particularly dead ones.’

‘Mmm!’ This boy, Rupert decided, was very serious indeed, just like Hansen. What made them so solemn? This one looked even younger than Hansen, and more dedicated, and with none of the American’s gentle façade of a casual discipline. Was he one of J. B. Lille’s experts? Was this the secret strategist and diplomatist at work, looking for the true answers? Rupert smiled. ‘Much too young and probably far too ignorant,’ he decided.

‘I haven’t got much time,’ Rupert said to Coleman. ‘We’re leaving tonight for the Black Sea.’

‘I know. That’s why I wanted to see you so urgently.’

They had reached a seat at the end of the garden. The massed, red brick of the Kremlin wall was behind them, Russian children in long stockings and black boots and sailor hats played in a sand heap on one side, and a woman selling *morozhnie* (ice-cream) had just set up her little blue box and stand near them, and she stood still in her white overall and cap, looking at them. Was she there to watch them?

‘She can’t hear us,’ Coleman said because Rupert had been staring at her for a long time. Rupert realized then that with all

this vodka attacking and retreating in his brain, he was probably reacting very slowly to everything. Had he been staring at her?

‘All right, what is it?’ he said brusquely, although he had hoped to sound business-like.

But now that they were safely wrapped around by gardens, Coleman seemed to relax a little, and he said to Rupert, ‘Did you notice how many young people there were in that queue to see the mausoleum?’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘Usually there are more old people. But you see more and more adolescents in everything here nowadays. It’s the 1945 generation arriving. That must have been a big year for babies in this country,’ he said thoughtfully.

‘The same everywhere,’ Rupert said.

‘Of course. I myself was born the day the war started.’

‘Were you really?’

‘Yes,’ Coleman said, and his intent student eyes were inspecting Rupert to see what kind of a man he was. Satisfied, he suddenly took an envelope out of his pocket and drew a little map on it. ‘That’s the Black Sea,’ he told Rupert.

‘Yes, I can see that.’

‘Now,’ Coleman said, taking a breath, ‘what we would like you to do down there, Mr. Royce, is to look for something around these places.’ Coleman circled a few points with his pencil.

Rupert sighed without paying much attention. ‘Ah well,’ he said a little cynically. ‘And what exactly do you want me to look for there?’

‘We need to know what areas are closed off, to begin with,’ Coleman told him. ‘You know, it was a marvellous idea, this Greek interest of yours. I wish one of our own people had thought of it. But you’ll do just as well.’

‘You think so?’ Rupert said drowsily, then he sat up. ‘What are you suggesting?’ he asked.

‘I’ll come to the details,’ Coleman said, eyeing the ice-cream woman. ‘The point is that you’ll be going to places on the Black Sea which no foreigner has been able to visit since the war. Those Greek colonies are right along the coast.’ He jabbed a pencil on his map again. ‘I’ve looked them up.’

‘So?’ Rupert said.

'What we are looking for down there are three specific things, which are all really the same thing. First, the closed-off areas which always suggest secrets. Second, radar of any kind. Third, and the most important, their early-warning system—their radomes. We know they have radar stations all over the Crimea, but we need to know exactly where, and more particularly where there is any sign of a radome.'

'And you want me to find out where all this stuff is?'

'Not *all* of it. That wouldn't be possible. But we must know, if possible, where they have their early-warning system.'

'You know,' Rupert began, 'I'm here as a guest . . .'

'Oh that!' Coleman interrupted. 'You mustn't let that worry you, Mr. Royce. Don't forget they do it to us. It's all perfectly fair, really. Everybody knows that we all do it any way we can, both sides.'

Rupert was shocked for an instant, and then he looked at this intent young English face and realized that Coleman was right. Of course everybody did it, under whatever guise they could. J. B. Lille was also right. There were no high and mighty rules to this sort of game at all. It was true. Wasn't it simply an extension of the contest itself—capitalism versus communism?

'Do *you* do it?' he asked Coleman, inspecting him with more serious interest now.

'You shouldn't ask that. Anyway, why else am I talking to you?'

'All right, all right. I understand.'

'Don't let that aspect of it worry you,' Coleman said gently. 'Everybody worries like that at first. But you're fairly safe. The problem is that we need detailed information, or rather as detailed information as you can get. We need to know exactly where they have their radar stations, and those radar domes. They're terribly important to us. Anything you do see, you must place carefully in its correct locale. You'd better not make any obvious maps, or none that could be recognized if they search your things. But you must be accurate.'

'Just a minute,' Rupert interrupted. 'I'm not exactly an expert at spying out the land.'

The boy smiled casually. 'Nobody ever is. It's always done best as a sort of improvisation. You have to snatch what you can, when you can. That's really the skill of it. So don't worry about not

being an expert, Mr. Royce. You will be better than most because of your own experience, so don't worry.'

'I'm not worried,' Rupert said irritably, and he was beginning to lose his sense of humour and to feel that this was not such a strange joke after all.

'Then what is it? You mean that you don't like doing it at all?' Coleman said, as if this was to be expected.

'Perhaps,' Rupert said slowly. 'I don't quite see why you depend on me for this sort of information.'

Coleman shrugged. 'We need it badly, I'm afraid; and you've got the golden opportunity to go where no one else can go. So you're hardly going to hesitate, are you?'

Rupert was studying Coleman to fathom him. He failed; gave up; thought of himself for a moment, thought of J. B. Lille, plunged his hands into his pockets, felt the Russian cheque, felt the repeated surge of distaste and resentment flood his heart again, looked at the ice-cream seller and at the queue between the flower-beds, asked himself what they meant to him, reached the conclusion 'Nothing!' and knew then that Coleman was quite right. J. B. Lille was right. Of course he should do it, although he wished that his mind was a little clearer, his heart a little colder. He must make it a rule, in future, never to drink vodka at all.

'No, I'm not hesitating,' he said. 'Go ahead. I'll do what I can.'

'We *must* know where their early-warning system is. We are sure they are building one somewhere along the Black Sea, and the Crimea is the logical place for it. You know what those tracking radar domes are like . . .'

Rupert nodded. He had seen them at Thule.

'But if you see any kind of activity that suggests heavy traffic to a closed-off area, keep your eyes open. Trucks with liquid oxygen, for instance—they're a give-away. There may be a rocket pad on the hills near Sevastopol, but we think it's a radome. Sevastopol is the most likely area for it, so watch out for it there, and for closed areas near there.'

'I don't know that I'm going to Sevastopol.'

'You can go if you want to, I'm sure. But anyway, watch out for any kind of radar on those high hills in the Crimea; odd-looking balloons too, or high masts. But it's almost certainly near Sevastopol that you'll find something. Or we hope so anyway.'

'All right,' Rupert said, preparing to get up and go.

Coleman held him back a moment. 'You'd better be very careful,' he said. 'I don't suppose I need to tell you. But they're pretty hot about their borders. Searchlights and guards and all that sort of stuff. It's a bad sea, the Black Sea. I mean for any kind of close-in work we could do from the sea, because it's all shallow. Try to make a sea trip. You may be able to see their radar links from the sea.'

'And what do I do with all this wonderful information when I get it?' Rupert asked him, still a little cynical.

'You can give it to Paul Poole when you get back.'

'Okay,' Rupert said resignedly. 'I'll do what I can.'

They stood up and young Coleman gripped his arm encouragingly. 'That's good. You're a famous man here, and you can ask for almost anything. Use it to the utmost.'

Rupert eyed the ice-cream seller who was watching them again.

'So I can count on you?' the student said seriously.

'I said I'd do what I can . . .'

Rupert could not keep his hand out of his pocket where he had folded the money into a tiny square. He unfolded it and yet never looked at it. Why did men bring money into everything? Why had they done that to him? What a stupid and vast curse it was to the world! Couldn't there be any act at all in which money did not exist to spoil it? He hadn't saved Alexei Vodopyanov for money.

He knew he was being over-sensitive about it, and probably he was also resisting this embrace of the hero a little too much. He was also the victim of Alexei's vodka. Even so, he did not feel happy or comfortable or honest with their money or with their sentiment. It was dragging him into a responsibility which he did not like. He was certainly not a friend to their Soviet Union at all. Never that!

'Do you want an ice-cream?' Coleman asked him, smiling at last.

'No, thank you.' His full stomach suddenly felt revolted.

'I'll have one,' Coleman said and stopped at the seller and bought one. Coleman eyed the woman closely to sum her up, to find out her secrets, to discover the truth of her. Satisfied, he was about to leave with his block of ice-cream when the woman said

something to him in Russian, and then spoke to Rupert. Rupert's tired brain was not up to Russian.

'What did she say?' he asked Coleman.

'She says she recognizes the English hero who helped our Russian pilot Vodopyanov off the ice. She offers you an ice-cream for nothing.'

The woman was holding out the small blue brick, and she smiled with golden teeth, catching the glow of the evening sun for a moment and putting worlds between them.

'Oh!' Rupert said and took it. 'Thank you very much.'

He realized that she had recognized him by his medal, which he still wore. He walked away from her quickly, but the woman went on calling after them in Russian, and Coleman sighed and said: 'What a strange people they are. I don't see any point in my going back with you. I have to go the other way, so I'll say goodbye here.'

They stood for a moment near the queue for the mausoleum, and they nodded to each other and parted, just as a blue-coated policeman came strolling along the queue. He, too, looked hard at Rupert, and Rupert remembered the medal. As he walked along he fumbled with his free hand to take it off and put it in his pocket with the cheque. That way he felt that he had lifted a little of the weight off his heart. That medal was not really his fault.

'Now what the devil can I do with this?' he asked himself as he held the dripping ice-cream away from his trousers.

He was crossing the wide road which led to the Red Square again when he felt someone grip his arm. He was startled.

'Sorry!' It was Coleman. 'But I forgot to give you this.'

'My God, you scared me!' Rupert said. He had dropped the ice-cream.

Coleman slipped something into Rupert's coat pocket.

'What is it?'

'An invisible-ink fountain-pen.'

Rupert was no longer capable of surprise or comedy. 'What on earth do I do with that?' he said.

'It will come in handy. You can overwrite or overdraw on anything except plastic with it. It is absolutely undetectable.'

'And what am I supposed to do to make it detectable?'

'I don't know. Nobody knows except someone at the other

end. That's the point. Give anything you map, or anything you note with it, to Paul Poole. He'll pass it on. Cheerio . . .

Coleman was gone. He had obviously doubled back deliberately and elaborately to avoid detection. Rupert longed now for an ice-cold head which could separate the serious from the ridiculous, because he felt very lopsided the way he was now equipped—Russian money in one pocket, Coleman's invisible-ink fountain-pen in the other.

Chapter Twenty-six

Vodopyanov kept on his feet for the two-day train journey to the Black Sea, and then fell to the ground, unconscious, when they got there.

On the journey he slid down the high steps of the train at half the stops. The whole population of the long wide train would get out, and Alexei usually returned with Russian delicacies: tiny pickled onions, strange berries, salted cucumbers, small hard-boiled eggs, a blackened chicken, freshwater shrimps, bottles of lemonade, and big thick buns with jam in the middle. All of it was inedible to Jo's mind and taste. She was revolted by everything.

The whole train knew Alexei Vodopyanov, and men in pyjamas and women wrapped in dusty frocks and kerchiefs talked to him, and to Rupert who felt responsible for him, because Nina, his wife, had been asked to fly ahead to the Black Sea instead of taking the train. Rupert helped Alexei up when he frequently fell, and Alexei in exchange filled their wide blue compartment with dusty food, with friends, with talk, with smoke, and for Jo—with pain, because Jo was appalled at the rackish dusty concentration of the journey, of the villages, of the people.

'It's a backward, wretched country,' she told Rupert. 'I could never like it.'

'It's a peasant country,' Rupert said noncommittally, with J. B. Lille in mind.

Their children were dusty and dirty, Tess was ill with a stomach-ache and Angelina had to baby her, and Rolland had learned to disappear along the length of the train where English-speaking Russians captured him and talked to him about his father and practised their English. Jo panicked at every station, certain that he would get off the train and never get back on again in the anarchy of the last-minute rush. She sent Angelina to look for him after every stop.

Rupert spent two days listening to Vodopyanov and staring out of the window at the distance upon distance, at long brown ruts of rolling tracks, miles of telephone wires, people in carts, women working in the fields, girls gathering wild strawberries by the railway line—their country faces bright and cheerful as they looked up: boys with white geese, mud villages, mud towns, dark skies.

He could make nothing of it yet, but in two days he knew what J. B. Lille had meant when he said that this country could get under your skin. There was something secretly fascinating about it.

‘You like Russia, Rupert?’ Vodopyanov asked him every hour.

‘Very interesting,’ Rupert replied with a little conviction.

They arrived at a small station called Gagra on the morning of the third day which was hot at 10 o’clock in the morning, on the very edge of the milky white fringes of the Black Sea. They hurried to get their luggage and themselves out of the train, which only stopped for a few minutes, and they were greeting Nina Vodopyanov and the men who had called for them when Alexei, as if he had finally delivered them safely to their destination, simply folded downwards, like a ship sinking majestically into a vast soft sea.

‘Alexei!’ Nina Vodopyanov cried in a moment’s horror.

The half-dozen men who had come to meet them leapt instantly into the situation, but Nina Vodopyanov also came to life. She ordered one of the men, in a high-pitched Russian voice, to go to the telephone and ring up the sanatorium. ‘Alyosha!’ she cried to another. ‘Where is the ambulance?’ ‘I’ll telephone,’ he said. ‘No,’ Nina told him. ‘They never answer. Get in the car and go and get it. Tell them it’s Vodopyanov.’ People gathered. She shouted at them. ‘Go away, comrades. Why do you stand around? Please leave us alone.’ To Jo and Angelina and the children she said: ‘You must wait in the shade. Go over there, please. And you, Mister Rupert. I will fix everything here. Please . . .’

Rupert felt responsible enough to resist. Alexei was yellow and

crumpled and very still. He was obviously so exhausted that his breathing was slowing down, visibly.

'I knew this would happen,' Nina said angrily to herself in Russian as she put a small suitcase he had been carrying under his head, while Rupert straightened his legs. 'I knew it!' she repeated unhappily.

'I'm terribly sorry,' Rupert told her.

'It's not your fault,' Nina told him, her eyes hot and angry now. 'It's my fault and it's his fault. You must not wait here. You are our guests. You must go with your wife. Anatoli Leontovich . . .' she called to one of the men. 'Take them to the datcha. Please! You must not wait here. We'll get him back to the sanatorium.'

Rupert stood up, still hesitating.

'There is nothing you can do here,' Nina Vodopyanov told him firmly.

He knew now that he was seeing some other Nina Vodopyanov. Her frailty was nonsense, and whatever Jo had done to subdue her in Moscow was quickly removed here. She looked at them with her sharp, clear eyes and he already felt her suspicion, and perhaps even her dislike.

'Please go with Anatoli Leontovich,' she said to him.

It was meant to be an appeal, but Rupert was aware of a huge insistence in that thin Russian voice.

They were given a small white Russian cottage with rough, painted floors, a big low verandah, a garden of trees and flowers and vegetables, and a row of cypresses along the front picket fence. A basin and a table and an electric hot-plate and a wardrobe full of dishes and pots at one end of the verandah served as kitchen and bathroom. The toilet was a dirt hole enclosed in a little hut painted green at the foot of the garden, and a towering, beautiful drooping willow almost covered one side of the little house and kept the hot sun off it during the morning. It swished with the evening wind, and under it was a small white hut for the *gardienne* who was a one-eyed peasant woman named Totya Marfousha—Aunt Marfousha. She locked them in at the garden gate, and she also locked them out when they went down to the sea.

To reach the pebbly white beach they had to cross the railway line, walk down a short winding path, cross the road, and there was the sea. On the first day when they came back at noon, Totya Marfousha couldn't unlock the gate to let them in. Nina shouted to her to open the gate, but she was looking in her small room for the key. She looked in the cupboards which she kept locked, in her suitcase and trunks which she kept locked. They stood at the gate waiting in the noonday sun, and they could hear her mumbling to herself:

'Where could I have put that cursed key?'

'It's probably around her neck,' Angelina grumbled.

'Is it around your neck?' Nina called out to Totya Marfousha.

Totya Marfousha put her hand into her bosom and there was the key on a piece of string. She came down the garden path with her lopsided walk, chuckling and ridiculing herself and her age and her stupidity, saying to herself:

'I wonder where the devil I will lose it next time.'

'Why does she lock the gate at all?' Jo asked Nina as they went in.

'She feels responsible for you,' Nina said.

But it was clear now that it was Nina Vodopyanov who was responsible for them. It was Nina who said she would come first thing in the morning and leave last thing at night. When Jo had already protested that she need not bother, Nina had said firmly: 'But I must bother. That is why our Ministry sent me here with you. That is what I am here for. Alexei and I must look after you.'

Alexei had regained consciousness in the sanatorium above them on the hillside where he had set out from, but he was flat on his back again. He was all right, Nina said, but they could not see him yet. More than that Nina would not say, and now that the thin part of her restraint had been snapped by Alexei's collapse, Nina Vodopyanov had become a firm-minded and determined woman who was obviously going to do her duty to her guests, but always with that faint touch of mistrust or disappointment which Rupert could now detect in all her behaviour.

He noticed it when he was trying to conciliate her, always feeling partly guilty about it. He had pointed out to her that Rolland had made himself at home. After one day of looking over the high fence, a half-dozen shaven-haired village boys of various ages

had plunged over and made themselves known. Totya Marfousha, her one good, devilish eye spying them, had tried to chase them out, but Rupert had told her to let them stay. Now Rolland had disappeared with them and it was lunch-time.

'He's found friends pretty quickly,' he said appealingly to Nina. 'That's good.'

'Yes. Children have no prejudices,' she said pointedly in reply.

There was obviously going to be no easy relationship between them, and their good manners with each other were already edged with distaste and hurt.

'You must keep Tess on a diet,' Nina told Jo when Tess's stomach-ache refused to go away. 'And I will call a doctor.'

'I know what I must do,' Jo replied tartly. 'And I don't want a doctor.'

'Nevertheless, you must be careful,' Nina insisted.

'Do you think I'm going to be careless with my own children?' Jo asked her.

Nina blushed and Rupert knew it was going badly, and he tried his best to correct it.

Jo told Nina that she would never like Russia because everything in it was so wrong.

But Jo had unusual scope for finding it wrong, Rupert decided, because she seemed to be a special victim of the crass differences. She set out with the children on the second day to walk across the railway line and the road to the sea. An old man in a white hat pointed to Jo's shorts and said angrily to her: '*Nyet. Eto nye culturni!*' and went on condemning her bare legs in sharp, shocked Russian. When Nina caught up with her and heard what had happened, she poured out an equally hot gush of Russian on the old man, and drove him away in fury. Then she turned to Jo and apologized for his stupidity, and Nina was almost weeping with shame.

'I'm so sorry. It's terrible,' she said. 'He didn't know who you were.'

'Did he mean that I'm not supposed to wear shorts?'

'Russian people aren't allowed to wear shorts in the streets,' Nina explained.

‘But that’s stupid!’

‘Yes, but it’s different for you,’ Nina said. ‘You can do what you like. I have special permission from the police for you.’

‘To wear shorts? But my God, the people on the beach are naked.’

‘I know, I know,’ Nina groaned. ‘It’s stupid. Please don’t take it seriously.’

Jo took it very seriously, and went back in a huff to the house and put on a skirt, and then put a skirt on Tess and made Rolland wear long trousers and Rupert also.

Rupert wondered—at this rate—how long Jo’s fury could last, and he could already see that they would probably not remain in Russia a month, or even a week if it went on.

Also Tess became worse. In the evening she had a fever and she said she couldn’t stand because of a pain on her left side, so that Nina Vodopyanov went running down the railway line in the darkness to the beach sanatorium to bring a doctor, who came back, breathless as if she too had been running. She was a young woman who examined Tess and said, finally, that it was probably a touch of colitis and that she must be put on a strict diet of rice and boiled water. Jo listened sceptically and said, when she had gone:

‘It’s not colitis at all. It’s dysentery, I’m sure of it.’

‘Oh no,’ Nina said. ‘It couldn’t be that.’

‘Oh yes, it could be. It’s this food we eat,’ Jo said. ‘And the flies.’

There were a great many flies on the verandah where they sat and Jo was already in despair that no one took much notice of them. The woman who brought their food from the nearby sanatorium and heated it up on the *plitka* on the verandah was a dark-haired Ukrainian, who said helplessly, ‘I know, I know!’ swishing the flies away. ‘But flies come from everywhere.’

‘Only if there is dirt,’ Jo told Nina Vodopyanov, who could say nothing to this sort of statement from Jo. Nina simply nodded her head and looked ashamed again.

‘We are supposed to go to Tbilisi tomorrow night,’ Nina told Rupert quietly now when they stood alone on the verandah for a minute at the end of a difficult day. ‘But if Tess is so ill . . .’

‘But who said we’re supposed to go to Tbilisi?’ he asked her.

‘The Greek professors there have asked you and your family.’

‘But I didn’t know anything about it,’ he said indignantly. ‘In fact I specifically said I didn’t want to get involved with your academics at all.’

‘You are specially invited.’

‘But when do I see the Greek sites I came here to see?’ he asked her, irritated by her fine air of duty—not only her duty, but his own as well. Visiting Tbilisi was obviously supposed to be his duty as a visitor and guest.

‘But these are important men. They admire you.’

‘Then, like everyone else, they admire far too easily,’ he said, and was sorry that he had said it, because it was rude. But he knew that she drove him to it. ‘What is there in Tbilisi anyway?’ he asked, to smooth it over.

‘It is a beautiful city, the capital of Georgia. Surely you want to see it? It is famous.’

‘All right,’ he said stiffly. ‘But when do I see the Greek sites? You must tell me that much.’

‘When you come back,’ she said firmly. ‘It is part of your programme. But if Tess is ill . . .’

Tess recovered, and Rupert persuaded Jo, against his better judgment, that they should make the trip to Tbilisi, because he was curious to see this famous Caucasian city. He also thought of Rolland: the boy should see everything. Surprisingly, Jo agreed. She was restless.

They took another train overnight to the Georgian city, and they were met at Tbilisi station in the hot morning sun by a dozen dark men in white baggy suits, and by women who held flowers and looked serious, all dark-browed and dark-eyed, and one big black-haired Georgian who looked like a tiger on a leash. He was introduced to Rupert as a famous professor of anthropology. Once more they were removed at high speed in limousines to a large hillside mansion where women in starched white coats met them and took them up to handsome bedrooms surrounded by large wooden verandahs and looking up dramatically at the high grey foothills of the Caucasus.

‘Beautiful! This is heaven,’ Jo said as she walked out onto the

verandah and looked down on a large apple and peach orchard below.

Nina said it was the Georgian government's rest-house for important guests.

'Thank God we're important,' Jo said happily. 'I love this.'

Rupert asked how long they were expected to stay.

'A week if possible,' Nina said.

'A week! But you're extraordinary,' Rupert said, almost losing his temper. 'You know very well I can't spend a week here. This is not why I came to Russia.'

'They will be terribly disappointed if you leave,' Nina said stubbornly.

'Then they'll have to be disappointed. A week!'

Nina was hurt and puzzled again. 'But don't you like it? Your wife . . .'

'Yes, but it isn't what I came to Russia for,' Rupert insisted. 'We can stay until tomorrow night. That's absolutely all.'

'I don't understand.' Nina looked at Rupert and saw no response, so she shrugged a little and said, 'Then I must explain to them. They'll be upset,' she said again, and she went to the telephone downstairs.

The children had been left downstairs with Angelina, and now they were calling up to Jo, telling her to come down into the garden because they had found a litter of puppies, which the chef, in a starched white cap, had produced from a box under the kitchen. 'Oh, they're beautiful!' Rupert heard Tess say. But then she cried out in pain, and they ran downstairs and out into the garden where Angelina was already holding her and comforting her. Tess's face was screwed up in pain, as she held her side.

'It's come back,' she told Jo, and she looked pale and ill again as Jo took her and said, 'Sweetheart! Sweetheart!'

Three Georgian professors were brought to Tess and the eldest of them, after examining her carefully, said seriously to Jo in broken English: 'Perhaps it could be serious.'

'Serious?'

'She ought to be kept in bed,' the other, younger professor said in French. He sat on the balcony looking more like a mechanic

than a doctor. 'It's very hard to diagnose children,' he went on. 'I don't think it is dysentery. It is possibly an infection in the colon. But she ought to go into a clinic to have X-rays.'

Jo said she was against X-rays for children, unless it was absolutely necessary.

'I think it is necessary,' the old man told her. 'In any case she should stay in bed, and keep quiet. We give her streptomycin in the meantime.'

Rupert objected. 'No streptomycin,' he said.

Jo argued that they should at least give her something, if she had an internal infection.

'It's a mistake to give children antibiotics at the drop of a hat,' Rupert insisted.

They went on arguing when the doctors had gone, trying to decide what they should do; and with the sad inevitability which Rupert had seen coming for some time, Jo said that she ought to take Tess home.

'Is it necessary?' he said. 'Do you have to be so drastic, Jo?'

'She's picked up a bug,' Jo said. 'Do you want these people to treat her or X-ray her or fumble about looking for what might be wrong with her?'

'No.'

'Do you want her to go into a Russian clinic?' Jo cried.

The soft Georgian sun warmed their backs as they stood on the wide verandah looking down on Angelina and Rolland playing with the puppies. The chauffeur of their limousine wiped the soft grey haze off its black shiny body. Nina Vodopyanov, as if this situation had become too much for her, was strolling dejectedly along the rows of apple trees regardless of her shoes or her feet blossoming in little clouds of Georgian dust. There were a few yellow wild flowers in the rows, and she bent down and snapped one up. She stopped; and Rupert would like to have seen her face. Was she dreaming? Or was she closing up her eyes and lips in preparation for another plunge at her now unpleasant duty?

'If you feel you have to go home,' he said to Jo, 'then that's it. Let's go.'

'You don't have to come,' she said sharply. 'I know very well that you don't want to leave here yet.'

'I came here to do something, and I suppose I ought to finish it,' he said.

'What about Rolland?'

'Oh, let him stay, Jo. He ought to see all he can.'

Jo put her arm through his and said in a surge of exasperation and impatience, 'I'm sorry, Rupert. I tried to like it. Honestly! I could even have put up with it if I didn't feel as if I were in a sort of prison. It's almost as if we might never get out. I can't help it. And Tess really worries me.'

'I know,' he told her gently. 'I'll cut everything very short, and then come home as soon as I can.'

'Don't do that. There's no need to.'

'I can't say that I like it myself,' he told her. 'But I ought to see a couple of these Greek sites. Then I'll come home.'

'Will you tell her? You get on with her better than I do.'

'All right,' he said. 'But I hope to heaven she doesn't take it as a personal insult. Why the devil do the Russians take everything so personally?'

*

Nina Vodopyanov said nothing at first. She nodded. She understood. 'All right,' she said. But then she changed her mind and said in dismay: 'But it's such a pity. Your holiday is only just beginning. Our doctors will look after Tess. Our doctors are very good. We'll get a nurse for her.'

'It's always worrying when children are ill,' Rupert pointed out gently. 'And they are better at home.'

'Couldn't you persuade them to stay even for a week?' she begged.

'I don't think so,' he told her. 'If we can get back to Gagra tomorrow then Jo can get a plane to Moscow. Perhaps you can arrange it so that she doesn't have to wait in Moscow for the London plane.'

'Of course, but . . .'

'Will you arrange it, then?'

Nina Vodopyanov nodded sadly and gave Rupert one of her quick glances which almost begged him to come to some sort of terms with her, although what the terms would be her serious eyes did not say and Rupert was inclined to resist anyway.

‘It’s a pity,’ she said miserably, and Rupert felt sorry for her again.

As a compromise with Nina he agreed to go alone that night to the dinner the Georgian professors of Greek were giving in his honour. In the meantime he spent what was left of the day seeing the city which the Georgians said was a second Paris.

He could not feel Paris in it at all. It had tree-lined boulevards, but they were all uphill; it had a river but it was a grey, fast-flowing, mountain stream; it had atmosphere but it was the atmosphere of the high Caucasus and the vast grey plains and dusty blue skies. The dark-eyed and wide-lipped people were not the worn-out pedestrians of Paris. They were not city-*commerçants*, and they looked light, almost flimsy and on fire, and not broken by their own debilities.

‘We are not Russians,’ the tiger-like professor had told Rupert good-naturedly when he had made a slip and referred to them as Russians. ‘We are Georgians.’

A strange woman had already approached him quietly, as he was standing by the river looking at the high fortress on a crag opposite, and she had said in perfect French: ‘Do not think of us as Russians. Don’t ever think that. Remember, Monsieur, we are Georgians.’ She had said it calmly and then disappeared quietly. Nina, who had also heard it, blushed but said nothing.

He noticed it also in their Georgian relationships with Nina. Being the only Russian among them she was treated by the Georgian professors politely and properly, but she was obviously an outsider here.

He began to think of J. B. Lille’s theories and requirements.

This sort of thing fitted them very well. But even as he detected their subtle antagonism towards each other—this edge of natural difference—he knew that he had been resisting, since his arrival, the eyes and nerves which the Admiral had given him.

Did he really want to look at this country with these special sensibilities which were not quite his own? He had tried to keep his mind independent and intact, and so far he had managed to resist the Admiral’s influences. But that shy man’s proposition was far more insidious than he had at first imagined. It was, in fact, very hard to look at this country in any other way. It was J. B. Lille’s way—the tempting curiosity of a rather sinister

purpose, of the sideways observation. It was the attraction of a planned curiosity to see how the place functioned—not in its own intrinsic sense, but in the tantalizing view of its possible human strength and its possible human weakness. Everything he saw could become a piece of evidence for estimating its chances of winning or losing the world's biggest contest. Yet the real question for a man watching it was—could you ever remove yourself from a struggle in which these two vastly different worlds were crashing noisily towards each other with considerable speed and violence? The answer was clearly *No!* How could anyone remove himself from it when the whole thing was about to blow up in everybody's face?

So he could not help having J. B. Lille's eyes and nerves after all, and here was this strange Georgian woman offering him a small piece of J. B. Lille's kind of evidence.

'You mustn't worry about Tess,' Nina was saying to him, as he tried grimly to sort it out. 'She'll be all right.'

'Yes, I know,' he said quickly. They were riding in the limousine. He had been caught worrying, although it was not about Tess. He glanced at Nina; he had developed this habit lately. Did she detect anything unusual in him? Did she have any real suspicion of what he might be doing—the sort of suspicion which would go deeper than her odd disappointment in him?

He hated to feel guilty with Nina Vodopyanov.

'Alexei told me you often liked to think,' she said now. 'I'm sorry if I interrupted you.'

She seemed to be searching for an explanation of him, and he did not like it, because she made him feel that he was always playing a dirty trick on her.

But introspection and suspicion had a short life with Rupert, and he shook it off and began to observe more closely this subtle difference between Georgian and Russian, which Nina's isolation reflected.

*

They dined that night on an open verandah high up in the Caucasian hills in a place called Tseneti. Far below, Tbilisi glittered like star-dust in the deep Caucasian valley. High up, pale-blue and snow-feathered, the Caucasian peaks seemed to be

driving a romantic bargain with the sky—that they should meet breathlessly in the clear and untroubled air.

On the verandah of the little villa was a table laden with food; and one of the guests, who was a Greek lexicographer, was singing songs from the Georgian epics. A professor of English named Nico sang a translation of them into Rupert's ear, saying it was a famous song of a Georgian prisoner in Persia.

Professor Nico sang:

‘Why do you poison me,
I love you anyway.
Even if I am beaten
I will never give up my motherland.’

For an hour the table had rocked around Rupert with eating and drinking and classical recitation and songs, many of them in his honour. They drank two lots of toasts, the ordinary ones out of a glass, and the important ones out of a horn. A chairman, called the Tamadan, had been elected to allot the toasts, and the large horn was handed to each man in turn to make a toast, which he drank himself to the bottom. It was a faint wine—pale and slightly sweet and yet sharp and thin—and these unknown Georgian professors raised toasts to Rupert and sang songs to him and praised him in Greek epigrams and in Georgian verse. Once they proposed a toast in Nina's honour, and they also sang a small song in Russian.

Professor Nico, translating at Rupert's elbow, informed him about everybody—who each man was, his importance, his field of knowledge, his age. Then Nico, his eyes burning with each English word and his descriptives orchestrating what was happening, leapt up to consult one or the other of the professors, and he returned to Rupert and said: ‘Drink, Mr. Royce! Be happy. You are among wonderful friends. Everybody admires you and loves your country and your poetry.’

Then Nico stood up himself and sang a song which two guitarists played for him and it began: ‘*Dili, dili, dili.*’ They all laughed happily and a young Georgian girl—one of the six women present, with pale faces and dark almond eyes—translated it for Rupert.

‘It's a very famous Georgian song,’ she said, and Nico sang it dramatically and passionately:

'Why do I like the mountains?
Don't ask me.
Why do I like the sword?
Don't ask me.
Why do I like my native land?
Oh but nobody must ask me . . .'

Nico's voice was hoarse and determined, and they cheered him and sang it themselves. Then they told Rupert to sing to them. He looked at Nina. She was, like him, isolated and yet tossed about on this Georgian sea, and he felt sympathy for her. He had a perfectly clear head, although once again he had been forced to drink toast after toast. But what song could he sing to them: could he sing 'Drink to me only with thine eyes' under these mountains and in this air?

'Oh no,' he said to them. 'I couldn't sing.'

'But you must,' Nico cried enthusiastically.

'English songs don't quite match your mountains,' he said.

'But we love Shakespeare,' Nico cried, and then he began to sing in English to Rupert while the guitarist plucked it off as if he knew it well:

'Where the bee sucks, there suck I,
In a cowslip bell I lie . . .
Merrily, merrily shall I live now
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.'

What was in Rupert's English heart when he felt it turn over? For one elaborate second the affection for his own country crowded into Rupert's warmed-up brain, so that the pleasure and the flavour of this English song pulled very hard on his restraint. Rupert had never felt so English in his life. Why was that? He warned himself against the wine.

'Elizabethan songs are like our songs,' Nico said, sitting down, laughing with his big eyes, while the dozen men and half-dozen women told Nico to sing more English songs and next time with Rupert's help.

'Ah no,' Rupert said slowly. 'We can't sing songs like that any more.'

'But they're your own songs,' Nico insisted. 'Don't you sing them any more?'

‘Not that way,’ Rupert said sadly.

One of the older professors now came around to Rupert and stood behind him and said in Greek:

‘Unlocked are the gifts of gods to men,
Those whom they love, they keep secure from ill.’

He bent down and kissed Rupert’s blond head, and said in French: ‘That is Euripides. The gods gave you so many gifts, my dear English friend. How happy we are to have you.’

The tiger-like professor, who was the Tamadan, then sent the horn down to Rupert who stood up reluctantly and looked down on Nina Vodopyanov and said:

‘I feel that I am here under false pretences . . .’

She put her head low, and he watched her closely.

‘I’m not an expert in Greek culture or Greek history . . .’

‘Never mind,’ they cried. ‘You’re a good friend.’

‘. . . and, of course, I knew nothing about Georgia until I came here. Probably I would never have come at all if Mrs. Vodopyanova hadn’t persuaded me . . .’

‘Bravo!’ they cried, and he watched her to see if he had given her back a little of the pleasure he seemed to have taken away from her. But she did not look up, and he decided then that this wine (he had downed more than two litres of it) must be a sentimental wine, because he wanted Nina Vodopyanov to look up with those frank eyes and tell him in some way that he was doing the right thing, trying to make peace with her.

She did not look up, so he said briefly that he was glad he had come, that he was sorry he must go soon, and that he hoped some day to return.

‘Welcome, welcome!’ they cried, and he drank the horn of wine and sat down and listened to them singing and reciting again, and watched them dancing—catching faint, cool glimpses through the hot night of the far-off white mountains.

It went on and on, and he hardly noticed the time passing at all, but eventually when he tried to get up to go, after another dozen toasts and songs and shouted verses from Georgian epics, he found that he could not stand. His mind was perfectly clear, but something had happened to his legs.

‘Nina,’ he whispered. ‘You’ll have to get me up.’

‘Don’t worry,’ she said seriously.

He leaned on Nico and Nina. It was time to go home.

He remembered that he had seen a well in the hilly garden, and he tried to put his head into it in the moonlight to clear up this paralysing of his legs. They stopped him doing such a dangerous thing and urged him into the limousine. The professors waved to him and sang farewells in Georgian as the car drove off down the white road along a deep mountain gorge to Tbilisi, lying under its big aura of pale, silvery dust.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Jo had gone, but at the last moment as she looked out of the aeroplane window at Rupert and Rolland standing on either side of Nina Vodopyanov on the hot tarmac, she felt that she was making a mistake.

'I'll come back if Marian says Tess is all right,' she had shouted to Rupert from the plane steps.

He had nodded unhappily. He didn't believe her—it was just an understandable fiction between them.

'You won't come back, Miz Royce,' Angelina had said to her. But Angelina was angry. She had wanted to stay. 'Miz Royce very selfish,' she had told Rupert as she carried Tess up the steps into the plane.

The plane took off in the roaring hot compression of its noisy jets, and Jo was in tears as the plane climbed higher and higher, because she felt already the isolation of what she was doing, and the danger of leaving her husband and son alone in this strange, unpredictable country.

*

On the ground below, Rupert the spy was beginning to stimulate a deliberate interest in his surroundings, almost despite himself. Where exactly was this airport, and how big was it? The airport was Adler, it was small and unimportant, and it was half-way to Yalta. There was no sign of heavy traffic, of oxygen cylinders, of radomes. He laughed at himself. What a piece of nonsense.

The real, tempting Intelligence here was to estimate something quite different, and no doubt Nina Vodopyanov herself could give him some of the answers he wanted.

How well, for instance, did Nina Vodopyanov represent the attitudes of Russians—of Soviet Russians? And not only their attitude to their own world, but to the outside world, and to the

ideas and practices of life? He was very curious about her, but by now he could not separate what was his own natural curiosity from what was J. B. Lille's strategic interest in the mysterious Russian mind.

They drove back to Gagra, and he spent the rest of the day unhappily. Jo shouldn't have gone home. He sat on the beach, and people began to collect around him and ask questions about England. Nina was cautious and asked him if he minded it, but he said *No* and answered their questions politely. When it was very late he went home and ate his supper and went to bed feeling very lonely without Jo and Tess. When he woke up in the morning he found that all his trousers had been stolen, and most of his shirts.

Nina came through the picket gate at breakfast-time and began the morning with her normal indomitable duty, saying: 'Good morning. Alexei is much better today.' He said 'Good' and apologized for his shorts, but said that all his clothes had been stolen.

Nina paled, held the verandah post and almost collapsed.

'Stolen!' she said faintly, as if he had hit her.

'It looks like it,' he said.

'We didn't even hear a thing,' Rolland added impressively.

'But it's impossible,' she said. 'Oh no!'

But she discovered that it was quite possible. Totya Marfousha wept with her one eye and repeated: 'Someone got over the fence. I can't be awake all night. Someone got over the fence . . .'

Totya Marfousha sometimes pottered around, gardening, at two o'clock in the morning, and sometimes she would come into the house, talking to herself, and strike matches over the children to make sure they were safe and asleep.

'We must call the police,' Nina decided.

'Don't do that,' Rupert told her. 'Totya Marfousha will be held responsible.'

'But it's not her fault,' Nina said, reviving with the need for action. She must do something. She must catch the thief, punish him, restore the trousers. Rupert saw it in her burning eyes, in her flaming but puzzled fury.

'Who could do such a terrible thing, in our country? Who?'

‘Why—a thief?’ he said, teasing her.

‘Of course! But to steal from you. It’s terrible. It’s shocking.’

‘You’ll have to get me permission to wear my shorts in Sukhumi,’ he told her.

They were going that day to the first Greek site in Sukhumi Bay.

‘Yes, yes,’ she said, still shaken. ‘But it is so horrible. What an awful thing to do. I can only apologize! I am sorry. I am very sorry.’

‘Poor Nina,’ he said. ‘Do you always feel so responsible for everything that happens in your country?’

‘Of course I do,’ she said sharply, but she could not keep back one tear of shame or anger. ‘Such men ought to be shot.’

He wondered if that was a *façon de parler*, or if she meant it literally. But she was too upset to be probed for that sort of information.

*

They left Rolland playing with his Russian friends, and Rupert, wearing a pair of baggy white linen trousers (which Nina had rushed down the village and bought for him) sat in the back seat of a hard little Pobeda car and watched Nina fighting off carsickness.

It was forty miles to Sukhumi by a winding road, and to take her mind off herself Rupert told her a little about the Greek colonial history of this coast. She seemed hardly interested in it.

‘Why do you admire the ancient Greeks so much?’ she asked him, lurching against him in the back seat, closing her eyes grimly and holding on.

‘Isn’t it natural,’ he replied, ‘since Greece was the birthplace of our civilization?’

‘What was the birthplace of Greek civilization?’ she said. ‘Why do you admire Greek culture, instead of Egyptian or Assyrian which are older? Why always Greek?’

Rupert had never given it a specific reason, not the kind she was looking for. It must be more than the idea of a heritage, more even than the pleasure of rediscovering it. But what she wanted was its relative importance now.

‘Well,’ he said nervously as the car swerved around the corners, ‘Greece at her best represented a very noble age. Greek men were

men. Even the gods were half men, just as the men were half gods.'

'What is so admirable about that?' she asked.

'I don't know, except that they were never awed by their times,' he said. 'They were very superstitious and they were terrified of ridiculous things like omens and curses, but they weren't like men in our own times; they were never overawed and overwhelmed by the times they lived in.'

'Greece was a slave society,' she said insistently.

'In Athens, and later in Greece,' he argued, 'free citizens were equal to anything and everyone. They were hardy and courageous men. They had all sorts of weaknesses, but they were also comradely, loyal, and deeply attached to each other. They believed in their own world.'

'Why must you go back to the ancients for that?' she said. 'You can find that in our country now.'

He laughed.

'Why do you laugh? It is true. We also want our people to be loyal, comradely and equal, but not brutal or primitive or cruel. The Greeks were not always admirable. You talk of Achilles. He was half a brute, and he behaved like a spoiled child. What is admirable about a past like that, except that it *is* a past?'

Nina was obviously going to be very car-sick, and he watched her auburn face become pale and her eyes cloud. He waited for her to mention it, but she did not. He stopped the car and told her to get out so that she could recover. She went down to a small stream where she lay on the cold stones breathing deeply, while he threw pebbles into the water and watched big old-fashioned charabancs filled with Soviet tourists going up the hot winding road into the high mountains behind them.

'Why don't you have those Greek ideals now?' she said, taking off her shoes.

'We do have them.'

'But your western society is violent and cruel, and it's not very heroic.'

'It is no more violent and cruel than yours; less so in fact.'

'In your society,' she said, sitting up, 'it is every man for himself. You allow your children to learn brutality. You have horror comics and terrible films. We don't have these things. We teach

our children to respect each other and respect society and to be good comrades . . .

‘Then why was Stalin so brutal?’ he demanded.

‘He was wrong. We know that.’

‘Your society is more brutal than ours,’ he argued. ‘Your laws simply don’t count. You can arrest people and send them off to Siberia without the vestige of a trial. That is impossible in England. Millions died like that under Stalin, so where was your education in ideals then?’

‘That was the result of the revolution and then the war, and terrible mistakes,’ she said as she put her shoes on and as they went up the slope and got back into the car which was driven by a tall young Abkhaz with a week’s beard on his dark face.

‘Not good enough,’ he said. ‘We also had a war. It didn’t make us cruel.’

‘You are cruel in your colonies,’ she argued. ‘And anyway, you only had a small war. You did not lose almost twenty million people. Your country was not burned to the ground. You did not know the brutalities that we suffered from the Germans.’

‘Even so, it was a war for us too. Our cities were bombed.’

‘Then you ought to have learned about war and brutality, the way we have,’ she said.

‘We can’t be so bad,’ he replied harshly. ‘Would you call Rolland the product of a brutal society?’

Nina Vodopyanov blushed and said, ‘Of course not. But you are a good man, and good men survive even the worst of societies.’

He laughed. ‘Won’t you ever give in?’ he asked her.

She did not understand, and she did not laugh.

As they set off once more he wondered again if this was what J. B. Lille meant. Could he really find out anything from this sort of argument which might fit J. B. Lille’s strategy of the mind? Was this the kind of thing he meant—this naïve attitude of Nina Vodopyanov’s towards her own countrymen and their strange, Utopian standards?

‘Probably not,’ he decided. So he had learned nothing new at all, and he would obviously have to be a better and deeper spy than this, if he wanted to find out what made the Soviet mind so frightening and so threatening to the west.

He decided in Sukhumi that it was easier to look for what young Coleman wanted, because the ancient Greek city he was looking for was now underneath the modern harbour, and the harbour was full of Soviet Navy ships.

It was hard to concentrate on antiquity when his mind was already looking around with the instincts of a sailor to see what the modern port was like. It was almost pleasant to do it. It was many years since he had looked at a port with professional interest in its depth, protection, exposure, moorings, entrances, anchorage.

He stood on the small pier and looked it over with Nina waiting patiently beside him.

Then he laughed and suddenly turned away. 'Anyone can do this sort of thing,' he told himself, and decided to concentrate on the ancient city he had come here to see—Dioskuriyas, the farthest port east in the ancient Pontus Euxinus of the Greeks.

They had been waiting at the pier to be met by the deputy mayor and members of the town council with flowers, and they were taken to a hotel and then to the museum at noon on a day which melted these southern skies into a grey, hot, suffocating mist. The museum was small, and it was supposed to tell the entire history of Sukhumi.

There was a small section for the Greek period, and the curatress showed Rupert a Greek stele representing the death of a boy's mother, which had been washed ashore a few years ago. It showed the dead mother standing in the background with tied hands, while in front of her a new foster-mother holding an open book was suggesting that her son would be looked after and guided through life. It was subtle and high art, Greek art and imagination at its very best. There were also pots and small amphoras and other social implements.

'They were a seafaring people,' the curatress told him sternly.

He nodded, and she enlarged on the social history of the Greek city, of which he knew little. He knew the more personal and romantic history of it because it was here that Mithradates, the last great independent king of Asia Minor, had spent a winter trying to organize Colchis and the northern tribes to make a last resistance to Pompey and the power of Rome. Mithradates had been Rome's greatest enemy in Asia Minor, and as Rupert left

the exhibit and walked along the corridors of the museum, he told Nina that the old king's courage and strength and skill in riding and hunting and fighting had been legendary.

'He also loved eating and drinking, and he spoke twenty-two languages,' he told her. 'He collected works of art and gathered Greek men of letters around him. He gave prizes to the best eaters and to the greatest poets. His body was actually so saturated with poison from his own practice of magic that nobody could poison him, so that when the Romans defeated him through the revolt of his own son, he had to tell a Gallic mercenary to murder him with his own sword.'

'He must have been a monster,' Nina said.

'He was a man of Greece!' Rupert said indignantly.

Nina did not argue, but she asked the curatress a few questions, and after a lively conversation in Russian, of which Rupert understood half, she turned to Rupert and said:

'Your Mithradates is all you said he was, but he also murdered his mother and his sons and his own sister whom he married. And he himself killed all his concubines so that the Romans wouldn't get them. Nobody trusted him, everybody hated him, and his own son ordered him to commit suicide. So what kind of a hero is that, Rupert?'

'You don't understand the past,' Rupert said with mock regret. 'Classical heroes were the beginning of heroism, not the end. They were, after all, trying to emerge from barbarism, so they were half-barbarian themselves. And anyway—were they any more brutal in those days than your own communist leaders have been?'

'Then why don't you admire our leaders also?' she demanded sharply.

'Nina!' he said in astonishment. 'That's a cynical remark.'

He knew he could always make her blush, but he was surprised when she blushed now and looked ashamed. 'You must *never* say that. I am never cynical,' she said in a subdued but angry voice.

He apologized. He did not want to hurt her. But who could have guessed that a light accusation of cynicism could bring shame to any young woman's heart these days?

They had brought Rupert a bee-keeper from the hills who was an underwater diver, because all that was left of Dioskuriyas itself was under the yellow stretch of hot sea in the curve of the bay. He had a small boat with an outboard motor, two sets of oxygen re-breathing apparatus, a pair of bathing-shorts for Rupert, flippers, and a small map of the underwater site.

'No, no!' Nina Vodopyanov said as they stood on the beach surrounded by hundreds of holidaymakers from the surrounding sanatoriums. 'He can't go underwater.'

'We don't *want* him to go underwater,' the deputy mayor told her, 'but if he wants to see what is left of the ancient city, that's where it is.'

'It's too dangerous,' Nina said.

'Of course,' the deputy mayor agreed.

'Rupert!' she said. 'You must not go underwater.'

He had understood the conversation, and he said, 'Why not? I've done it before, and after all I came here to see that site.'

There was an argument among his reception committee, among the personnel of the museum, Nina, and among the hundred on-lookers—one of whom warned him in English:

'It is dangerous. You can get lost in the streets down there and never find your way out.'

The bee-keeper—his shy and unshaven face watching and listening—said nothing, and he stood in his ragged blue shorts and waited. A hundred people argued, but Nina was adamant that he should not go, and she was supported by all the officials and half the spectators.

'Oxygen is bad,' someone said. 'It kills divers.'

Rupert knew that was true. Too many men in the Navy had died using this apparatus to consider it safe, but he listened to it now with fascination. It was everybody's discussion.

'He's a hero,' someone said. 'Let him do it.'

'If he won't go down,' a young man announced, 'let us go down.'

Rupert was thus challenged in his own department. His status as a hero was at stake, and he laughed and tugged at Nina's elbow and said, 'Let's go.'

It was very hot, and Nina held a white sunshade over her fair head, and she now held it over Rupert and said, 'Please! Don't go down with that machine. You must be experienced.'

'But I am,' he told her. 'Honestly.'

She didn't believe him. She knew enough about him already to doubt him. And she was right, he decided, because he had never used an oxygen device, although he had used an aqualung with fresh air, not stale air.

'Please, Rupert,' she begged him. 'Think of your family. What would I say to Rolland if something happened to you? And what could I tell your wife?'

'Come on, come on,' he said impatiently, and rolling up his baggy white trousers and putting his soft shoes into the boat, he helped the bee-keeper to launch it, helped Nina and her white parasol in, and then sat down while the bee-keeper named Mikhail started his engine.

Rupert expected them to go far out into the bay, but they went a few hundred yards obliquely across the sea and then stopped a little beyond the line of swimmers splashing about in the sandy water.

'Here?' he asked the bee-keeper in Russian.

'Somewhere here,' he said.

'Okay,' Rupert told him, and then told Nina to turn her back while he changed into the shorts.

She dropped her umbrella quickly between them in embarrassment, and turned her back. Rupert stripped off his Russian trousers and put on the blue shorts and the flippers and sat down while Mikhail the bee-keeper helped him on with the oxygen re-breathing set. Mikhail explained to Nina in Russian what he must do, and she repeated it:

'He says you must fill the bag with deep breaths of air, and you must not let the air out. You must not hold your breath, you must breathe steadily, and you must refresh the air regularly with the oxygen from the cylinder. You must turn the tap open all the way, then close it again. But I wish you wouldn't, Rupert. It is dangerous if you don't know about it.'

'Shussh,' he said. 'Ask him what I'm supposed to do below.'

She asked and she said: 'You see, I told you. It's pointless. He says you won't be able to see anything today because it's too dirty. You can only feel . . .'

'Feel what?'

'The roofs of the houses,' Mikhail said to him. He showed

Rupert the map and explained the rough outline of what they had discovered and mapped, and he said: 'They lie in the mud, so you must be careful.'

Rupert nodded and put the mask on his face and the open mouthpiece over his mouth.

He had filled the bag with air after two or three deep breaths, and the slight ammoniacal taste of reconditioned air dried his mouth.

'He'll hold you, and show you where it is,' Nina shouted to him. He looked at her worried face and smiled at her as he went over the side to wait for Mikhail, who eased himself off the boat, nodded, and then they dived.

On the surface of this hot flaccid water, Rupert had realized that the water would be murky, but he was surprised that he could see absolutely nothing at all even a few feet under. One metre down and it was pitch-black. He was lost, instantly.

A hand found his arm and pulled on it. He held his breath. He must remember not to do that, and he went on breathing in short puffs as the bee-keeper pulled him along. Their hands met and the Russian began to push his hand deep into the ooze—this mud of a millennium which lay heavily on the top of this old brick town.

He felt something hard.

The Russian kept urging him on, and though he felt cautious in the darkness he went on boldly and he began to feel the shape of a dome, of bricks, of a complex mass of structures, obviously roofs.

Rupert was romantic enough then, in the black muddy pit of this darkness, to put two hands on these bricks and feel the throb of a lost and yet living world.

'Marvellous!' he said into his mouthpiece, and a little water came in. He swallowed it.

The Russian urged him on, and they covered a circular roof. Rupert forgot himself then and went groping around the bricks as if he had the city in his hands, and he was there for some time before he felt a hand urging him up with a grip and a push.

They came up and swam to the boat and scrambled up, dripping and clumsy.

Nina's face broke into a smile of relief. 'You are all right. I couldn't see you.'

'It's remarkable,' he said. 'Even better than I thought.'

'But he said you couldn't see anything.'

'It's better that way,' he told her. 'It's buried under a thousand years of mud.'

The bee-keeper asked him why he said that.

'Some day, if you can ever get all that mud up, you'll probably find the whole town completely intact under it. Mud preserves.'

Mikhail nodded when Nina had translated. 'That's what we want to do,' he said. 'But we'd have to close off this part of the bay, and there are sanatoriums here for many thousands of people.'

He asked Rupert then if he'd had enough.

'Not at all. Is there something more?'

'There is supposed to be another part, farther out. Old divers have told me they've found amphoras there,' he said, 'but I've never been able to discover anything.'

'Let's go,' Rupert said in Russian.

'Ah, no! Please,' Nina said to the bee-keeper. 'That's enough.'

'Oh, come on, Nina. Don't spoil it now,' Rupert said. 'There's nothing to worry about. Let's go, Mikhail,' he said.

Mikhail started the motor and they went out another hundred yards where there was much more activity in the sea. There were two whaleboats of cadets from a cruiser. Four submarines were lying together off a large buoy.

Rupert suddenly felt afraid to be so near those submarines with a diving apparatus on his back.

'Should we be diving near those submarines?' he asked Mikhail.

The Russian glanced casually at them and said, '*Nichevo.*'

Rupert accepted this assurance and put on the mask while Mikhail explained that this was deeper, almost the maximum depth for oxygen, so that he must use the cylinder more often. If he felt dizzy he must come straight up.

Nina sat under her sunshade looking worried again, and they went over the side and dived. Rupert began immediately to kick his way down. He went down a long way, and he did not reach the bottom. He breathed quickly and kicked again and he drifted slowly down until he suddenly felt a clammy embrace and he realized that he was lying on the soft mud of the bottom. It was

probably fifty feet thick, and it was all over him, unpleasant and slimy.

This time, in the absolute darkness he lost Mikhail, and he began to grope about the bottom, feeling for solid objects. It was like swimming blind in custard. He found a small brick, put it in his shorts and groped on.

The explorer was uppermost, and he began to forget. Though the air in his mouth tasted stale, he only knew something was wrong when it actually happened. He began to feel dizzy. He groped for the oxygen valve and turned it, but he was already sick, and he kicked off from the bottom to rush upwards. He kicked hard and thought he was up; he discovered that he had turned around and was on the bottom again. There was no way of telling which way he was going. He was so nauseated and dizzy by now that he wanted to rip off his mask, and only a tremendous strength of will stopped him doing it.

He kicked off again and went on kicking, but he knew that he was some distance from the surface when he felt himself losing consciousness.

Nina, under her white parasol, saw him come up with his head twisted on his shoulder, and knew that something was wrong. She called out to him and he sank again. She called out to Mikhail, who had come up and then gone down again to look for him. Mikhail wasn't there.

She jumped overboard and swam the few strokes to where he had disappeared, and she saw him come up again. She held him by the hair and called out to Mikhail.

'*Horoshan*,' she heard. 'I've got him.'

The bee-keeper ripped off Rupert's mask and then pulled him to the boat, and with little ceremony tipped him over into it. Rupert lay in the boat gasping in short breaths, unconscious at first, then slowly awakening and feeling sick and looking up suddenly at the wet figure of Nina bending over him and saying his name.

'Rupert . . .'

He recovered, sat up slowly, and realized in a moment what had happened as he looked at their horrified faces.

'I'm terribly sorry,' he said hazily.

Nina held him up and Mikhail unstrapped his apparatus.

‘Are you all right?’ she said to him. ‘What happened?’

‘I’m all right. I must have fainted. I think I forgot to feed in the oxygen.’

‘You didn’t open the valve far enough,’ Mikhail told him. ‘You’ve got to open it completely.’ He showed the valve to Rupert who nodded and looked around him. Nobody else was concerned. It had happened so quickly that nobody in the whaleboats or the cruiser or the submarines or on the shore had noticed it. He looked at Nina Vodopyanov.

She was wet and upset; her hair was plastered on her face, and her face and neck were pink with sunburn from the hot sun. She was looking at him with such concentration that when their eyes met she took a deep breath and turned away.

‘We must get you ashore here,’ she told him.

‘I’m perfectly all right,’ he said, sitting up and recovering his balance. ‘Tell Mikhail I’m terribly sorry. It was my own fault.’

The bee-keeper was also upset, and yet so calm that Rupert knew that he was a good man to be with, and he nodded at Rupert and said, ‘I’ll go around the other side of the bay and we can see the remains of a Turkish town on the shore, and we can land there easily without anybody bothering us.’

‘But we should go in here,’ Nina said.

‘No,’ the bee-keeper said. ‘It’s better around the corner.’

She understood. They all understood each other very well. It was an embarrassing secret they must keep, and as Mikhail started his motor and as they passed close to the four submarines, Rupert’s technical eyes glanced over them, and he wondered what part of his brain was free enough to look at them and estimate their tonnage, their armament, their horsepower. He glanced quickly at Nina Vodopyanov as if she might have guessed what was in his mind.

She was pushing back her wet hair.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked her.

She nodded, and looked at her wet dress.

He knew what she had done, and he was feeling very grateful to her. But he thought of the comic irony of a fate which permitted Nina Vodopyanov to do for him in a few seconds what it had taken him six months to do for her husband. He knew

he would have sunk to the bottom if she had not held on to him.

He was about to thank her when he saw that her whole body was visible through her wet dress, and he realized only too clearly that she was very feminine after all.

He looked elsewhere and said nothing.

Chapter Twenty-eight

He talked with Jo in London, shouting down the phone of the sanatorium which was simply the holiday house on the beach belonging to the Ministry for the Far North, and which was filled with men and women who looked like Lapps, and also with obvious Russian pilots, with obvious geologists and glaciologists and meteorologists. Obvious? They must be, he decided, because each one wanted to talk to him like an expert. They told him how much they admired his journey across the ice with Alexei.

They all heard him shouting to Jo.

‘Is Tess all right?’

‘Yes,’ Jo’s faint voice told him. ‘Marian says exactly what the Russians say. It could be an infection in the colon. But she says it isn’t serious.’

‘Does she have to go into hospital?’ he bellowed.

He had to repeat it, and he hardly heard her reply; but in general the answer was ‘Perhaps.’ They would settle it in a few days.

‘She’s playing outside with Fidge now. She’s all right.’

There was no more talk of them coming back to Russia, and Rupert was glad of that. He had to admit that it was easier without Jo.

It was morning in London and afternoon in Gagra, and Rupert knew he was keeping the sanatorium awake. The whole place was supposed to be asleep, according to a notice on the main doors below. But no one had obeyed the rule today because he was there. He was so relieved about Tess that he sat down in the lounge on a big chair with a white cover near a table with a tasselled cloth on it and talked to twenty people, many of whom asked him technical questions about his experience, which he could not answer.

'How do you explain that you drifted the wrong way?' one of them asked.

'I haven't the faintest idea,' he told Nina. He understood the questions perfectly, but did not trust his own Russian to reply. Nina translated sternly and officially. 'Maybe the shore drift there is opposite to the general ocean current.'

'I knew the radio-operator of Vodopyanov's plane,' a thin Russian with glasses told him. 'I knew poor Sergei all his life.'

Rupert remembered the yellow frozen figure in the radio cabin, crouched in the corner with a mess of log books and navigational paraphernalia piled over him. Now it could nauseate him, so he told the man nothing.

Two other men began to ask Nina questions in low voices, saying to her in Russian: 'Ask him.' But Rupert heard her refuse, and when he said to her 'What did they want to know?' Nina replied, 'They are silly questions. You would not be interested.'

They all came out into the garden with him, and one woman at the gate, who had her arm through Nina's, looked admiringly at him and said in English:

'I love your family. I saw them on the beach. I'm happy your small girl is better.'

They all shook hands with him and on the way home he questioned Nina about the sanatorium. 'Is that where you sleep?' he asked.

'Oh no. I sleep in the annexe of the hospital where Alexei is.'

He felt that he still had a responsibility towards Alexei. He asked after him every day, and now he asked what the doctors said about Alexei's future. Would he ever walk properly again?

'They think so. There is nothing serious, I mean organic, wrong with him now,' she said, 'except the atrophy of his leg muscles and nerves. But that will go away slowly, they say, if only he can be persuaded to do everything gradually. As you can see, he tries to do too much.'

He nodded. 'But that's the way he is, Nina,' he told her. 'You couldn't stop him if you tried.'

'I know. I know,' she said. 'But I must stop him for his own sake. For months when he came home I had to think of a thousand means of keeping him still, but it's impossible.'

'Could I see him?' He had asked this almost every day also.

But Nina was cautious. 'Of course you can see him,' she said. 'But they have been giving him drugs to keep him quiet, and we don't want to excite him again. In a few days he will be up again.'

'I suppose it was very hard on you during all those months, when he came back.'

'I did not feel that. It's never been that. I've never even been tired for a second with Alexei, even when he's ill. He makes everything work. He's always a happy man, too, even when he is in pain.'

'That's true,' he agreed.

She looked at him then, and laughed: 'Of course! You must know as much about him like that as I do.'

'I doubt it,' he said, 'but looking back on it, he was always remarkably good-natured, even when I was bad-tempered. We never quarrelled, although there were times when he must have felt pretty bad. Did you know that he tried to drown himself once, to give me a better chance of surviving?'

'No, I didn't know. But he would do that. He often says to me, "*Look what Royce did! When you think of it! Jumping out of that plane!*!"' Nina was thoughtful for a moment. 'Everybody in our country admires you and Vodopyanov,' she said. 'And they are right. I admire you too, and admire my husband. You are both brave men.'

That sounded embarrassing, and he went on quickly to ask her about all these so-called sanatoriums, about holidays, and what kind of people were privileged enough to use them, and why.

'Because they work well,' she replied.

'Is that the criterion—work?'

'Why not?' she said aggressively. 'In our country it is so.' Her suspicion had quickly returned, her hint of antagonism was back.

He thought it was a pity. He did not mean his questions to be provocative, but he knew that they were. But he had long ago lost sight of the dividing line between his own curiosity and J. B. Lille's. Perhaps they were now one and the same, and Nina was such a subject for curiosity in herself that he liked to provoke her a little, just to see what happened.

'They all look like people you call intellectuals,' he told her.

'They're not!' she argued. 'There are ordinary workers among

them. Some of those women today are kitchen workers from our stations on Novaya Zemlya.'

'Isn't that where you test your atom bombs?'

'We don't test bombs any more. We gave it up . . . by ourselves.'

'Nina! Nina!' he said.

She smiled, and he felt better.

'Where have you been in the far north?' he asked her.

'Everywhere. Even on the drifting stations.'

'Is that your work? Or is it because you're Alexei's wife?'

'My work!' she said indignantly. 'Wives can't do things like that just because they're wives. I am a cultural worker in our Ministry. I went to almost all our meteorological stations in the Arctic last winter.'

He must ask her more about the Soviet Far North. She must know it fairly well, and with a little careful questioning he could probably find out where most of their meteorological stations were. Certainly nobody in England knew where they all were.

'Damn this!' he said to himself.

He did not enjoy thinking like a spy, but it already seemed to be second nature to him. Everything, in fact, seemed to fall into its place for J. B. Lille's vast curiosity. He had even looked with professional interest at the single-track electric railway line, at the fishing fleet which passed by one morning, at the frequency of the buses; and he was also interested in the fact that the roads were confined to the coast. There were no roads into the mountains, excepting one to a nearby alpine lake called Ritsa. Why hadn't they built more roads into the hills?

'These hills are too soft,' Nina told him. 'The earth sinks and subsides and collapses too easily. It's not worth it. Even this road is new.'

Before the war, she said, most of this coast was mosquito-ridden, because all this lowland by the sea was swampy. They had recently planted all these eucalypts, and now the swamps had gone, and they had built this road.

He wondered if anybody in War Office Survey knew that these coastal swamps had gone, and that this asphalt road had been extended along the whole coast.

Nina took him in the evening a few miles to the west, to the

older town of Gagra, which had been a resort even in Czarist times. It looked old and established, it had a Swiss-like chalet overlooking the public botanical gardens, and in the evening he strolled with Nina through the gardens, along the paths among several hundred other young men and women singing Russian songs or reading books aloud to each other under the dim yellow lights.

'Why do they walk here, and not along the sea or in the mountains?' he asked her.

'But Russians love to walk in gardens in the evening.'

With so much free and wild and empty country behind them, he said, he did not understand it. But he realized, with sudden insight, that free and wild countryside didn't interest Russians, because their whole country was too free and wild. It was not like England: all England was a garden, therefore the English went round the world looking for wide-open and empty spaces. Russia was already wide and spacious and untidy, and the Russians wanted neatness and compactness; and they had it in this formal little seaside garden.

'He's so damnably right!' Rupert told himself, always thinking of J. B. Lille when he found himself making these small speculative estimates of Russian behaviour.

They were walking home beneath the eucalyptus trees which lined the roads. Buses passed them, packed to the seams of their rattling frames with hot humanity. They were all singing at the tops of their voices. Russians always sang. Russians loved to be together. The bullfrogs from the gardens could be heard for miles. 'How right he is,' Rupert repeated grimly to himself. He knew he could never escape J. B. Lille now. Everything in this country was different, fascinating. How could you help investigating their extraordinary character?

And the purpose of it?

He knew and understood the ultimate purpose quite well, but that was hardly the point any more. Who really believed in a war? But he wondered how much longer he could go on being bombarded with ideas about the Russians without writing some of it down. He felt too vulnerable already to risk what was probably safe and quite genuine comment to a diary. It might be dangerous. Even so, how could he go on with these elaborate speculations

without losing one sensation to a new one, one idea to the next? Explanations were now beginning to come thick and fast.

'No, no,' he decided firmly. 'Nothing on paper.'

He laughed at the thought of that wonderful fountain-pen Coleman had given him.

'Why did you laugh?' Nina asked him.

'Did I? I was thinking of something funny,' he said and felt like a hypocrite. He felt doubly so when Nina put her hand innocently into his arm, as they strolled home in this warm Russian night.

Chapter Twenty-nine

He thought he was being a little too suspicious of Nina, and yet it seemed strange that they should suddenly acquire a third person before they left Gagra and moved on, and in such unusual circumstances.

When Nina disappeared from time to time, he knew she was not only going to see Alexei, she was going to consult somebody about her guest, Rupert Royce. When he asked her for something or suggested a move, she would say: 'I will see,' and go away and come back with the answer. Whom did she ask? Where did she go? He felt as if he were being governed by an oracle. And why did she keep him away from Alexei? It was extraordinary how these small suspicions mounted up. There was always something in their behaviour which suggested mystery. But he could not help wondering how much of it was his imagination, and how much of it had a perfectly simple explanation. Probably he would never know, and perhaps that was the real frustration of it.

There was now nothing else of any importance to see at this end of the Black Sea, and he had reminded her again that the main point of his visit to Soviet Russia was the island of Leuce, near the mouth of the Danube, at the other end of the Black Sea.

'That is going to be very difficult,' she said.

'None the less, Mayevsky in London told me it would be possible,' he argued.

'It's possible, Rupert, but it is also difficult,' she said stubbornly. 'We must wait. We could go on to Phanagoria in the meantime.'

Phanagoria was the most famous Greek site on the Black Sea, the city on the Kerch peninsula which had probably been the most important ancient Greek town, and which the Russians had been excavating for many years, both in the water and out of it.

'The island is more important,' he insisted.

They argued about it and he insisted that he did not want to waste any more time in Gagra. If he must wait to go to the island, then they should go on to the Crimea to see some of the small sites, then Sevastopol, and then try again to reach the island of Leuce, leaving Phanagoria until last.

'I'll see,' she said and disappeared at midday down the hot railway line, while he watched Rolland learning to play chess with the neighbouring village boys, two of whom spoke a fair amount of English. They were already close friends, and they all spoke a gabble of Russian and English among themselves. Rupert asked the boys where they had learned English.

'At school,' Lekid, the older boy, said.

'What school?'

'At our village school,' Vakhtangi the younger told him.

It was a few doors down the rakish street and was the best and biggest building in the village. Through the windows he had seen microscopes and film projectors, and he wondered if it were typical or special. He shrugged off that J. B. Lille question. There was no way of finding out the true answer to a question like that.

When Nina came back she said. 'Tomorrow we go to Lake Ritz'a.'

'What about the island?' he demanded.

'Tomorrow we will decide,' she told him mysteriously.

Why should they go to Ritz'a? Nina's flushed cheeks held a secret, and when the Ministry's Pobeda drove them along the coast, along the wide mountain river and up into the alpine country, he watched Nina closely to see that she did not get sick again. But though she was pale she was determinedly telling Rolland that there was an odd little corner called Pitsunda on this coastline which had escaped the glacial age. There was actually a line somewhere here where the ice had stopped. The kind of pre-glacial pine trees at Pitsunda were proof of it. She told him about caves in the hills which were supposed to be where Prometheus sheltered, and of other caves nearby with Stone Age drawing in them. There was a dolan, and already he should notice that they had left sub-tropica and were in Swiss alpine scenery.

'You love to teach all the time,' Rupert told her. 'Like the French.'

'But it's interesting,' she said, 'and young people have very little time. Then they are adult. Then it's too late. Aren't you interested, Rolland?'

'Sometimes,' the boy said, secretive again now that he was locked in with adults. He had wanted to stay with his friends on the sea, but Rupert had insisted that he look at this famous lake so near the hot shores of the Black Sea, and Rolland was still feeling resentful.

The lake was clear and cold and pellucid and lovely. Was there any sign of a radar system in these mountains? A chalet-hotel filled with day-trippers from the seaside huddled down on one end of it where the icy lake overflowed to begin one of the rivers which cascaded down the high mountains and widened out in the valley, and then flowed into the sea. They were met by the manager, and taken in a fast motor-boat around the rocky shores of the lake. When Nina asked Rupert if he liked to fish for *forellen* and he said 'Yes,' Nina told him that the rivers were full of trout, and that a doctor would come in the afternoon and take him fishing.

They ate lunch overlooking the lake, and the doctor came afterwards to join them. He was a lanky young man named Feodor Papanin and he inspected Rupert frankly and closely and said in Russian: 'I am Feodor Nikolaievitch Papanin. Theodor Papanin,' he said in English. Then in Russian, '*Ponemayeti?*' Then in French, '*Allons-y!*'

'Where?'

'Fishing!'

'What about equipment?'

'All ready,' Feodor said, and then he smiled languorously and looked steadily at Rupert and said in English: 'Teddy's always ready.'

He turned around suddenly as if it were all settled, and Rupert found himself following at a fast pace, down into the cellars of the hotel, through the kitchen where Teddy said over his shoulder without stopping, 'I am dietician here,' and into the back of the building where Teddy snatched up a paper bag and said in his lazy voice, 'Bait. Caviar.' He picked up two bamboo rods, each

one twenty feet long, and continued without a pause over the dark rotting wood around the first waterfall, down the damp shadowy pine paths, cold and wet, and then straight down five hundred feet without pausing, to an almost perpendicular slope which Teddy negotiated non-stop with a falling, staggering, agile run. Rupert, breathless and terrified, followed for a few hundred feet on his backside, sliding and falling and staggering and slipping to keep up with this unpausing uncoiled spring who was far ahead of him. Teddy held the long poles high up in his hand, and Rupert could hear him talking.

'I'm going to break my neck,' he called out to Teddy, who didn't hear.

He slid a hundred feet on his stomach and caught up with Teddy, who turned around and looked surprised to see Rupert covered in mud down his front, side and back.

'You fell?' he said. 'Not so good . . .'

He began to brush the mud off Rupert, and then he swung the poles around and said, '*Ne tombez pas!*' and disappeared again.

Rupert stumbled, ran and staggered down the slope. There was a rough path, and the roar of the river below; and he knew as he got up speed that he was going to go straight into the water. He could not stop.

'Too fast!' Teddy shouted. He was already sitting very relaxed on a rock near the river unravelling the lines from the long poles, and Rupert caught the full view of this tranquil scene even as he knew he was going straight into the river.

Teddy pushed out one of the long poles and tripped him, and Rupert went head over heels into a soft mush of damp bracken and leaves.

He lay on the ground panting and trying to collect his broken body, and Teddy picked him up by the arm and said, 'You were going into the *wasser*.' He made the calm gesture of a man diving in head first and added demonstratively: 'Plumph!' Then he said, 'Never mind, Rupert. Up you get.'

Rupert got up, and Teddy jerked his arm and pointed to a deep hole in the middle of the river behind a large collection of boulders. It was packed with small rainbow trout, and none of the fish was paying any attention to all this commotion.

'*Forellen!*' Teddy said, and put a pole in Rupert's hands.

'Teddy always ready,' he said and his lean wry face laughed again and his fair hair flopped over one eye. 'Here's your bait,' he said and put a paper parcel into Rupert's hand. It was a coagulated mess of red caviar, and Rupert pushed it into the pocket of his now filthy white Russian trousers and tried to take a breath. This was not permitted. '*Avancez!* Fish!' Teddy told him firmly.

Still panting, still exhausted, Rupert lifted the long pole and dropped the hook, which had a large egg of red caviar on it, into the pool of rainbow trout, and in two seconds he had a fish.

'*Raus! Raus!*' Teddy shouted excitedly. Rupert, in astonishment, pulled the rod up so quickly that the fish was caught and dangling and jumping about in a tree above them.

'Ah, *merde!*' Teddy said and was already halfway up the tree. Rupert seemed to glance up at one moment, and the fish landed at his feet, freed by Teddy, in the very next moment.

He was wiping his exhausted hands on his hips, stealing a moment's respite, when Teddy said on landing from the tree: 'Okay? All right?'

'Yes. Absolutely,' Rupert said and decided that if this was the pace, he could keep it up. 'Look out,' he said and plunged his hand into the mess of caviar which packed his pocket. He hung an egg on the hook, and threw it in before Teddy could advise him.

But Teddy's line was already there.

'Now. Quiet! They understand now,' Teddy said, and added in English: 'Very clever.'

It was true. The extraction of one fish seemed to have alerted the others. They did not bite immediately.

'Sit!' Teddy whispered in English. Rupert sat on a rock. Teddy sat an inch from him with his rod a few inches away and parallel to Rupert's. Their hooks were hardly a centimetre apart in the water.

'Hup!'

Teddy had leaned over and snatched Rupert's rod out of the water. A small trout struggled on the line, and Teddy had it off and had pushed it into his shirt with the other one, and caught another one on his own rod before Rupert could organize any real resistance to this haste.

They fished the pond out in five minutes. They had twenty fish in their shirts and Rupert was thinking: 'These voracious little gluttons!' He blamed the trout for being caught. He dare not blame himself. If he had ever fished in the trout beats of any of his various relatives along the Test or the Severn using salmon eggs, they could justifiably have shot him dead as a viciously bad sport. No bigger crime! He tried to tell Teddy, who listened half-way and guessed the rest.

'Not here,' he said casually in Russian. 'There are too many fish here, not enough food. Too small, Rupert.'

It was probably true.

They left the hole and Teddy went leaping downstream along the river, his long pole over his shoulder. Rupert tried to keep up, and tried at the same time to dodge the tip of Teddy's pole. When he ducked under it or kept back for safety Teddy said: 'Keep up. Don't wait.'

They were crossing the river at a wide bend. Teddy was leaping ahead from rock to rock like a mountain goat, waiting for Rupert to land on the rock he had just vacated. But once Teddy forgot, and instead of taking off immediately in his goat-like leap, he stopped, turned and said suddenly and sadly to Rupert:

'You know, Rupert. Yesterday our great *chanteur*, Vertinsky, died.'

Rupert heard the news halfway to the rock in mid-air. Teddy occupied the rock. Rupert felt himself nodding sadly at this unhappy death, and then he dropped (for lack of space) into the deep hole of fast water between them. It was icy. He hit the bottom and came up. He could see Teddy already leaping downstream from rock to rock to save the rod.

'Okay, Rupert!' he heard Teddy shouting. Teddy had the rod.

Rupert scrambled onto a rock against the current, catching a half-live fish which had floated out of his shirt, recovering dead fish by grabbing at them as they swirled around him in the current. He called bravely, 'Okay. Okay. What are we waiting for?'

Teddy studied this wet and dripping wreck and offered Rupert his perfectly dry and clean and even tidy shirt, despite his waistband of fish.

'No. No. It's hot anyway,' Rupert said, pushing his wet hair back.

Teddy nodded agreement and said. 'A good hole down there. Bigger *forellen* too.'

They leapt onwards and the torrent seemed to flow at *their* pace, under *their* feet, in *their* flow—and they fished all the holes. Teddy was always a few centimetres from Rupert, and after another ducking and with Rupert's wet shirt full of fish, Teddy said it was time to go home.

Rupert looked back at the high mountains with their pine forests towering upwards to the blue sky and knew it would take them five or six hours to climb back, if in fact they could.

'I'll never get back up there,' he told Teddy.

'We'll ride,' Teddy said, and led him at a loping pace to the roadway, where they waited for a bus to appear.

It came, one of the huge roofless charabancs with seats across its breadth filled with shouting, bulging people. The driver pressed on his klaxon and ignored them. Another charabanc followed, and everybody shouted gaily to them; but the driver ignored them. Before the third one came, and when they could hear it struggling uphill, Teddy told Rupert to wait. He ran down the hill fifty yards, stopped in the middle of the road, and held up his arms and stopped the bus, *force majeure*. He walked up to the protesting driver, whispered something, nodded his head backwards at Rupert, and then called Rupert to come.

Rupert, feeling like the hunter's dog, picked up the two long rods and ran to the bus, knowing quite well what Teddy had said. '*Angliský gero! Rupairt Røyiss!*'

The English hero, struggling with two long poles, his wet shirt full of dead fish, his pockets a jelly of red caviar, his white pants torn and slimy, and his legs muddy to the knees and his blond hair over his face, stepped up into the charabanc. They cheered him.

Girls shook his fishy hand, a young man took away his rods, and a seat was found for him and he was bumping up the mountain again listening to them singing an English song, or rather an American song: 'Oh my darling, oh my darling, oh my darling Clementine . . .'

Where was Teddy?

He turned around expecting to see Teddy singing his head off with the others, but Teddy was sitting relaxed in the back next

to a dark young girl. He was in deep conversation with her, as if he had been ready for this conversation all day.

Rupert sighed and said: 'Teddy's always ready, all right.' And feeling run-out and mindless (he should have been investigating these hills), he rode up the mountains singing with them.

They cheered him again when they arrived. They all shook his fishy hand as he gathered up rods and escaping fish; and he staggered to the hotel where Nina stared at him in amazement.

'But you fell in!' she cried.

'Oh, once or twice,' he replied.

'You look awful! You must change your clothes.'

The immaculate, spotless Teddy again offered to lend him a shirt. But Rupert refused, preferring to retire, *hors de combat*, in his own armour. But Nina sent him inside and went herself to buy him a rayon shirt and new trousers at the kiosk on the lake. When he put the shirt on it reached below his knees, so that Rolland—breaking his world of silence—was crushed with laughter.

Rupert could see Rolland's point of view, but he had confused feelings when Nina told them that Teddy would come back with them.

'To Gagra?' he said.

'No. Everywhere! To the Crimea also.'

Chapter Thirty

Nina told him that she might have to send him alone with Teddy, and perhaps she would follow them to the Crimea later, because Alexei really needed someone to watch him all the time and she couldn't leave him yet.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I shouldn't desert you.'

Rupert was her duty, Alexei was her husband. Alexei was going to win.

'If I could only persuade him to behave,' she said sadly.

'Impossible,' he told her.

'I know. I know.'

But in the afternoon she came back and said that the doctors had found a male nurse who would stay with Alexei all the time and see that he did not walk about too much. So they finally went up the hill to see him before they left.

There was no mystery after all. Alexei was not in bed. He was sitting on a balcony in the sun playing cards with another patient who had a large and very ugly scar on the neck, and half one hand missing.

'Meet my friend Nikolai,' Alexei said to Rupert and held his friend in a tight grip as the man struggled to get away. 'He's also from the north, Rupert. Look at him. A drum of paraffin fell on him and almost cut off his head.'

Nikolai smiled fleetingly at Rupert and then looked away and struggled in Alexei's grip, as Nina said, 'Don't go, Nikolai. Stay.'

'But the sun is too hot for me,' Nikolai mumbled and broke free and hurried up the steps and disappeared.

'He's as shy as a fish,' Alexei said to Rupert. 'He wants to marry one of the nurses, and he can't find enough courage to ask her, so he wants me to do it for him. Does that make you jealous?' he said affectionately to Nina.

Nina was putting a straw hat on Alexei's head and she said, 'Which one? The girl from Azerbaijan?'

'No. The other one who is called Natasha. He is in love with the name, that's all it is. Every Russian loves Tolstoy's Natasha,' he told Rupert, 'but Nikolai is in love with *all* the girls in literature. Natasha Rostova and that girl called Lady Brick in Hemingway. Ah, how he loves that Eng'ish girl. And he loves Nina also, very much.'

'Don't, Alexei,' she said softly. 'He may be listening. You will hurt him.'

'He doesn't understand English. Nikolai speaks German and Japanese. I asked him if there were any Japanese women he loved, and he said there was a woman in Japanese literature called Murasaki. She wrote books, long ago. He says there is nothing in any language so good. Wonderful, he says. Japanese women, he says, speak the pure Japanese, much better than men. He would marry a Japanese heroine in a Japanese book if he could really find one.' Alexei laughed happily. 'Poor old Nikolai,' he said to Nina. 'You must help him, Nina.'

'What does he do?' Rupert asked. *What was a student of Japanese doing in the far north*, he really wanted to know.

'He's a fish expert,' Alexei told him. 'He knows everything about fish and nothing about women. Poor old Nikolai,' Alexei said sadly again. 'And now he thinks he has no chance because of his neck and his hand. That's why we joke about it. We must get him used to it. It's nothing, we say. Who cares? You're a hero, we say. But we'll get him married somehow. He would love, above all else, to marry my Nina.'

'Don't tease me, Alexei,' Nina said.

Rupert had watched her putting a parasol over Alexei's head and putting his feet under his chair and pushing his body forward. He had realized by now that they were both very shy with each other in public, and that they camouflaged their real feelings with this rather straightforward game of give and take. She was saying to him, 'If you have to stay in the sun, protect your head, and try not to perspire down your back.'

Alexei got up and pushed her gently into Nikolai's chair and said, 'I'm all right. Don't worry so much. When I am a bit better I'll come to the Crimea and join you.'

‘You see,’ Nina said helplessly to Rupert, and she said to Alexei: ‘You know, if you do that, I’ll simply go away. I swear I will.’

‘You ought to take it easy,’ Rupert told him.

‘Why?’ Alexei said. ‘It’s all here, Rupert?’ And he tapped his head. ‘It’s my head not my legs that matter. Eh, Nina?’ he said teasingly to his wife. ‘She wants me to be very sick like Camille. Dying!’

‘That’s not true.’

‘She knows nothing about men,’ he teased.

She blushed and said, ‘I can’t help that.’

‘Look at her!’ Alexei cried affectionately, delighted that he could still make his wife blush. He was in a good mood, and he did not try to stagger about to prove to himself that he could walk like a man. He sat still and told them a long story about a flock of geese which had deliberately attacked a low-flying plane in Siberia because it was flying over their nesting grounds. The geese had brought the plane down. It was true! He had gone out in a little Pod-dva to pick up the pilot, and he too had been attacked. In fact they had whole tufts of hair plucked out. ‘Worse than eagles. Hyenas of the air—geese are,’ he said. ‘Attack everything.’

He was in a calm mood as well as being in a good mood and when they left him the woman doctor told Nina quietly that in the morning Alexei’s male nurse would be here, and that she needn’t worry. It was better that Alexei circulated, even if he overdid it a little, because they could not go on giving him sedatives all the time to keep him quiet.

Teddy was an uncoiled spring in action, but in repose he was a watcher and a listener: a tranquil, gangling man.

But Rupert knew that they had provided him with their own Russian Javert: the agent who could follow behind him and look over his shoulder. And was it possible that this one, like the original in Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, would also make a move when the time came?

On the large white liner which took them to Yalta from Sochi, Teddy sat peacefully in a plush armchair in the suite which

Rupert and Rolland had been given, and read *The Life of Matvei Kozomyakin* by Gorki. His luggage was a white raincoat and a small black suitcase. Nina seemed instinctively to argue with him, as if they already understood by a look or a hint or a word that they had very serious disagreements. Nina argued and Teddy usually made his point and then sat quietly and listened to her voice and said nothing more, which frustrated Nina and made her angry. Nina called him Feodor Nikolai'tch, and the angrier she became the more frequently Rupert heard: 'Feodor Nikolai'tch!' As a rule they spoke so quickly that Rupert understood very little of what they said.

Teddy watched Rolland for a day on the boat before making any attempt to talk to him, then he casually unfolded himself and showed Rolland how to make coins disappear, how to fold and tear paper into a concertina of dolls, how to swallow pencils, and how to write his name backwards in Russian.

'Perhaps Rupert doesn't like him being taught tricks,' Nina said to Teddy.

'Boys like tricks,' Teddy said calmly. 'You call me Uncle Teddy,' he said in English to Rolland, who surprised Rupert by saying with an open heart: 'All right!' Teddy spoke English to Rolland, but he no longer spoke English to Rupert, because he had learned how much Russian Rupert spoke and now refused to speak anything else to him.

The boat, the *Rossia*, was very full. Passageways, decks, stairways and even bathrooms were packed to the walls with holiday trippers and travellers and peasants with bundles. They lay on the floors, they nursed their children, they carried cloth bundles and food. The ship no longer looked like a liner, and was more like an overcrowded ferry with no room left to move about her. They would travel like this for two days.

'Take a voyage if you can!' J. B. Lille had suggested, so had Coleman. Here he was, but what could he see? Where were Coleman's radar domes, or the secret radar links?

The shore was not far off, but it was lost in a blue mist. The harbour at Novorossisk, where they lay for a few hours in the afternoon, was clean and more or less empty, although four cargo ships lay at berth in a side harbour and two big tankers lay off the main entrance to the port. In modern warfare this compact little

harbour, which was a real harbour, could probably be destroyed by one or two large conventional bombs. Its approaches were obviously dredged regularly, the sea-roads were deep enough for these big tankers to lie there. A dozen Navy torpedo-boats in excellent trim lay bows-on to quay, and four standard-built boats which looked sturdy and strong lay in the inner harbour and each had *Spasatel* written on her sides.

‘What does that word mean?’ he asked Nina.

‘Life-saving,’ she said.

‘You mean salvage,’ he suggested.

‘What’s the difference?’ she asked.

‘None, I suppose,’ he said.

He laughed and said to himself: ‘Let Teddy discover, if he can, what my mind is soaking up here.’ This Russian Javert could not possibly get into his brain, so how could he ever find out what mischief his mind was up to?

‘Teddy will have to be very ready,’ he said.

He had decided to take up the challenge of Teddy, although a glance at that tranquil man in the chair, and a recollection of the decompressed man on the river, made Rupert suddenly cautious, a little worried.

Whatever he was, Teddy was *not* what Nina claimed he was: a doctor sent with them to see that neither he nor Rolland fell ill, like Tess.

But he was a good companion; an unobtrusive man who argued with Nina offhandedly but firmly, and who went downstairs before they were due to arrive at Yalta and persuaded the keeper of the luggage-room to open up, so that they could get Rupert’s suitcase out. They had not been allowed to take it up the obstructed passageways to their cabin.

While they were waiting at the door of the luggage-room, Teddy began to talk to a young woman dressed like a peasant and wearing a thick shawl which covered her face to her eyes. She was standing in a crowded corner feeding a baby at her breast. It was Teddy being ready; he was deep in conversation with her in an instant, and he leaned down and took off her heavy veil, looked at her face, and then tucked the veil back again. He looked closely at the baby suckling at her breast and then he wrote something on a piece of paper and put it in the woman’s small bag at her feet.

Then he asked Rupert to help him with a very heavy rucksack which he got out of the luggage-room and dragged to the woman and left it at her feet.

Again he argued with Nina, but Rupert could not understand them.

Worming in and out like a lithe snake, Teddy manipulated Rupert's suitcase up the staircase and crowded passageways, over the people who were pressing together now—waiting to get off. When they reached their stateroom he flopped into a chair and said *Wait*.

Rupert sat on the bed and asked him about the woman. Why did she wear a veil in modern Russia?

Teddy told Nina something, and she said to Rupert, reluctantly, that the woman was travelling incognito.

'Incognito?' he said. 'What does that mean? She looks like a peasant.'

Nina and Teddy argued again, and though Rupert understood almost nothing, he did hear Teddy insist in his casual way to Nina: 'Tell him! Tell him everything. Don't keep secrets . . .'

'What's that?' Rupert said. 'What does he mean, don't keep secrets?'

They might have forgotten that he understood them, and Nina, chagrined, said: 'He means that I should tell you what the woman said. She is a woman who is running away with her baby from her husband's parents, because if they catch her they'll take the baby away, and they might even kill the mother.'

'Good God,' he said. 'In this day and age?'

Nina looked at Teddy angrily, and then she said slowly to Rupert: 'We have many primitive-minded people still. She is a Russian woman, a nurse. She was married to an Ingush; they are people who live above Krasnodar. They are a tribe, they are Moslems and some of them are still backward. She worked there as a nurse and they didn't like her being so bold and free as a woman. Even the Ingush women were against her. So when she had a baby, and the baby was a girl, she felt that it was no place to bring up a girl, and she decided to run away secretly.'

'Why secretly?' he asked. 'Couldn't she have just gone away?'

'No. No. They would have stopped her, and they would have kept the baby. She arranged it with her Ingush husband. She saw

an advertisement in the Novorossisk paper for Roentgen-ray nurses in a sanatorium at Yalta, and she arranged with her husband so that she would go out of the village at night, on foot, carrying her baby as if she were going for a walk to collect wood in her rucksack. But she kept on walking. She walked all night and then the next day and next night also, and then she caught a train to Novorossisk and left her husband to say that she had gone to some friends in a neighbouring village because if her husband's parents knew, they would catch her and bring her back.'

'But that's incredible, Nina,' Rupert said. 'Will she be all right? Can she get a job in Yalta?'

'Feodor Nikolaievitch will help her. He's a doctor.'

'Did she carry that heavy rucksack for two nights and a day?'

'Of course.'

Rupert did not quite believe it, and he said: 'But it felt as if it were filled with lead.' Nina told him that it was filled with books—the only thing she had brought with her—a complete set of Balzac. Rupert laughed and said, 'But that's impossible! I don't believe it!'

'But it's true,' Nina said indignantly. 'She left everything—all her clothes. She would not leave her books.'

He looked at Teddy, whose open face and clear eyes looked back at him with a lightly wry smile. Was this a clever man? Was this a man who could plot a better course for him than Nina by telling him the truth about everything? Perhaps. In any case he knew that Nina had already censored a great deal of other information for him. What was the real history of Mikhail, the diver and bee-keeper? Why had one of the neighbours fought bitterly with his wife and staggered along the street wearing his war medals, very drunk and weeping? Why had a woman walking down the railway line at Gagra tried to commit suicide by running towards the train—whose driver had simply stopped, got out, smacked the woman hard, and then got back up into his cabin and proceeded? There had been so many incidents, which Nina would gloss over and refuse to explain

'They are not important,' she would say. 'You will not find them interesting.'

'But of course they're interesting,' he had complained. 'Why don't you tell me . . .?'

But he did not press her too much, so that so far she had succeeded in hiding a great deal from him, even of the things that had happened in view of both of them.

Now Teddy said to her: 'Tell him everything!'

What sort of a Javert was this? And what did it do to Nina's unblemished view of her country and her fellow-citizens and her big hopes for its future?

Chapter Thirty-one

It was an August day, still and muffled and hot, when young Coleman found the English hero lying on a cement pump-house on a narrow stretch of Crimean beach, while a dozen village boys squatted round a beach fire a few feet below him, cooking fish which they had speared. They were talking like soldiers, like men.

Rupert was looking down at their bright, hard, blond faces and admiring them. Rolland's English face had character, he could see that, but it didn't have the hardiness of these boys from the village up the hill. Two of them were smoking, and every time one of them pulled a piece of the rascasse, which they were cooking, out of the fire, everyone else growled at him to put it back.

Rolland, in their esoteric circle, was accepted as a privileged equal, and allowed to take one of the fish out of the fire and eat it when he liked, which he did with considerable confidence.

It was a small boy's hard world, and Rupert turned over and looked at Nina who was disapproving, and then at Teddy who had tried to go underwater with these boys, using their home-made masks and crude iron spears; but Teddy's excess of energy in action had put him into a panic, and he had choked and abandoned the idea.

'Their mothers are badly educated and should be ashamed,' Nina said.

'Their mothers haven't time enough to be ashamed,' Teddy argued. 'They work too hard,' he told Nina. 'Why should boys be angels? They're rough, but they're not mean or unpleasant.'

'Do you like to see such boys,' she said to Rupert, 'in your society?'

'I don't mind them in any society,' Rupert said.

Nina seemed to have an extended desire to mother or to boss children, and Rupert was wondering, as he watched her, why she

didn't have children of her own, when he suddenly noticed Coleman standing twenty yards from him on the sea's edge, sweating in a tweed jacket.

'Hello, Coleman,' he said, sitting up quickly.

'Hello, Mr. Royce.'

Coleman approached like a man who was not sure of soft ground underfoot. He looked quickly at Nina and at Teddy, and then kept his eyes firmly on Rupert.

Rupert introduced Coleman as an English student in Moscow whom he knew, and then asked Coleman ostentatiously what he was doing down here.

'I came down to Yalta with a group,' he said. 'We were being shown over the sanatorium and they told us that the English hero was here, so I thought I would say hello. But I must go back immediately because they're waiting for me.'

'I'll walk you up the hill,' Rupert said, and excusing himself and putting a towel over his head and shoulders against the sun, he walked over the rocks and up the rough path with Coleman, who said to him:

'I thought I'd run into you somewhere if I kept my eyes open.'

Coleman said he was on a week's trip to Yalta with a group of foreign students, and this sanatorium was as far west as they were allowed to go. It was only a few miles west of Yalta. Coleman thought he had better see Royce, if possible, to warn him:

'They caught two Germans—a man and his wife—in the Ukraine about a week ago,' he said to Rupert. 'I know nothing about them, but they were stupid enough to take photographs. They're in serious trouble. So I remembered that I didn't warn you about cameras. We don't want photographs of anything; so don't, for heaven's sake, produce a camera.'

'I don't even own one,' Rupert said irritably, 'so you don't have to warn me about that sort of nonsense.'

'Good,' Coleman said. 'But watch out, Mr. Royce. They caught these Germans fairly easily. They were always asking innocent German questions. Have you seen anything worth while yet?'

'Nothing at all,' Rupert said, upset by this sort of talk.

'Don't worry,' Coleman consoled. 'You may see a great deal when you get up there.' Coleman nodded his head towards the

high top of Ai Petri, the massive rock mountain which framed the sky and the countryside, mounting upwards to where it sat like a fat goose brooding over the whole Crimean shore. 'You haven't been up there yet, have you?' he asked.

'Not yet.'

'Get up there somewhere and take a look. That's one place worth stretching a point to see. The other one is Sevastopol. There is something on one of these sites, so look carefully.'

'Isn't it a bit dangerous of you,' Rupert said to him, 'coming here like this?'

'Not at all. It would have been dangerous if I hadn't asked to see you. I'm the only Englishman on the tour, and the guide told us you were here. But let me warn you again, Mr. Royce. Be very careful. They watch everybody, even you. They have all kinds of tricks and devices to discover what you're really doing. Those two Germans were supposed to be art experts, and they had very good contacts here.'

Rupert noticed that Nina was climbing up the hill below them so he said goodbye quickly to Coleman who said insistently to Rupert: 'It's that tracking radar we're after—the big radar domes. And my guess is that it's somewhere near Sevastopol. That's our big hope.'

Coleman said goodbye and got into a bus which was waiting at the main door of the sanatorium. With its youthful passengers staring in curiosity at Rupert, they drove off back to Yalta.

'Rupert!' Nina said, reaching him. 'I want to talk to you about Rolland.'

'Oh?' Rupert said. 'What is it?'

'You know you should send him to one of our *arteks*, our children's camps. It would be much better for him than playing on that beach with those wild boys.'

Rupert laughed. 'Ah, Nina!' he said. 'A little savagery is good for city boys. Those boys are all right. They're good for him.'

'I know they are all right. All children are all right. But they are not typical, and Rolland should be doing what our other boys do.'

'What do they do?' he asked suspiciously.

'They make things, they organize their own lives, they read literature and organize walks and study nature and play music and games and arrange concerts . . .'

‘Where?’

‘There is an *artek* not far from here. He would like it. And when we go to Sevastopol it would be better than leaving him here.’

‘I thought you were going to stay here with him.’

‘I want to come with you to Sevastopol,’ she told him.

Did she want to protect him from Teddy’s reckless revelations of life in the Soviet Union? She and Teddy argued openly with each other now. Teddy would often make a sharp remark which sounded like the truth to Rupert, but Nina would always correct him. They had argued this morning about this sanatorium—the ‘Rossia’, and because Rupert knew what it was about, he had understood it. Teddy had told him that this was one of the buildings which had been criticized, after the Twentieth Communist Party Congress, as typical of the Stalin period. It was heavy, expensive, wasteful, ostentatious and wrong. Nina argued that when these monumental buildings were built, they were necessary. Teddy said they could have built five bigger and better and cleaner and simpler buildings for the price of this one. Nina said: ‘Isn’t socialism allowed to have something better than clean, simple buildings?’ ‘No!’ Teddy said. ‘They are best. And anyway, we should concentrate on giving people what is necessary first.’ Nina had said angrily: ‘In that case you wouldn’t plan to send a man to the moon until everybody had a bathroom.’ Teddy laughed, and Nina appealed to Rupert. Didn’t he like this building?

‘It depends on what you want it for,’ Rupert said slyly. ‘If you want a Greek monumental palace, it’s not bad. If you want a place for people to live in for a few weeks, it’s got too many corridors, too many cellars, and too much wasteful space between space.’

‘You cannot have grace without waste,’ Nina insisted.

He disagreed with her; but he said he didn’t mind monuments himself. From across a hillside of abandoned vines, near the lighthouse which had been a Greek village in 400 B.C., the ‘Rossia’ looked white and Greek and lovely against the sea and the high crags of Ai Petri. It was surrounded romantically with black Crimean cypresses. Inside, Rupert had a comfortable three-roomed apartment, and just outside his apartment there was an annexe which could have accommodated fifty people.

‘They were right to criticize it,’ Teddy said.

Dare Nina disagree with a government criticism?

‘They forget the times,’ she said stubbornly. ‘Then it was right to build it, even if it isn’t now.’

She would not be reckless. And now she wanted to go to Sevastopol with Rupert to see that he was not misled by Teddy’s critical opinions—if Rolland would go to the children’s camp.

‘I’ll ask him,’ Rupert said. ‘If he wants to go, then he can go.’

Rolland thought about it and said, ‘All right. If it’s interesting.’

Rupert said he could not guarantee that, but Nina was already mothering Rolland. She whispered to Rupert: ‘He is like you. He thinks carefully, then he makes up his mind.’

Nina disappeared to consult her oracle, and she returned later to say that it was all arranged.

They left the following morning by limousine and drove along the hills of vineyards, through the neat hot holiday city of Yalta, and then along the soft hills and down again to the rolling coastal plain.

The ‘camp’ was a highly organized holiday home for a thousand children in red kerchiefs. The buildings were palatial and crowded with boys and girls, and the gardens were rich and formal, and the paths were asphalt. A white Greek pavilion overlooked the sea. Each one of them (Rupert, Rolland and Nina) was taken away by a group of children who held their hands firmly. A small boy with hair like a wire brush and an older girl with dark plaits gripped Rupert and led him to the main building, where they showed him dormitories of clean beds, clean cupboards, and red plush recreation rooms. They showed him the gardens, and then they all danced (a hundred of them) in the Greek pavilion where an accordionist in white trousers played Russian songs. Some of the children were Africans, and some were Chinese and Mongols, and a few were Tadjik Moslems and leather-coloured Lapps. There were no masters visible, only the children.

When Rupert wanted to make sure that they would not fill Rolland with communist propaganda, he asked the girl in pig-tails, who was twelve and spoke good English, if they learned about politics, and she said, ‘Yes. Of course.’

'What do you learn?' he asked her.

'About Lenin,' she said.

There was a room which was called a Lenin museum, and Rupert asked to see the director and questioned him closely. Of course they were taught politics, the director said. All Soviet children were.

'I'm not too keen on that,' Rupert told Nina.

Nina told this to the director, who said that Rolland could be excused. But it would be rather difficult to keep him out of some of the activities, such as the competitions for each group, the meetings they held among themselves, the art and nature study, the talks, the literary discussions, the reading of Russian classics.

Books did not worry Rupert so much. 'Do they have books in English?' he asked Nina.

'Of course. Thackeray, Jack London, Smollett, Chesterton, Dickens and Dreiser.'

'They aren't so political,' Rupert said to the director, who was a man without any *presence* at all. He stood quite still, while the children collected around them and talked among themselves. Rupert looked at him, and at the children and he decided that there was nothing regimented about them. So he shrugged and said to the director: 'Oh, it doesn't matter about the politics anyway.'

'We don't really teach them anything,' the director said through Nina's very convincing voice. 'We let them teach themselves. That's why it's hard to say we can prevent it.'

'It doesn't matter,' Rupert said again. 'He can take his chances.'

Could the power and appeal of Rolland's English education withstand a week of communist indoctrination? Rupert was sure it could. But he looked doubtfully at the asphalt paths, and he sensed again the urge of these people from a vast and wild country to seek compactness and order in hard city streets and asphalt playgrounds. He asked Rolland if he wanted to stay.

'I think so,' Rolland said

Rupert knew he was probably too proud to back out now anyway. The boy was obviously not too sure, and when they said goodbye and left him with his suitcase at the main door, Rupert wondered if he was doing the right thing. Jo would certainly not approve of this at all. But when the other children crowded

around their car as they left, he looked around for Rolland. He was already disappearing: the girl with plaits was holding one hand and a small Chinese boy had a grip on the other.

Yet there was one other fear in this. When the car was high up in the hills on the way back to the sanatorium, Rupert found himself thinking of J. B. Lille's view of that *artek*, and he was thinking also of Coleman's radar domes which might be up in these isolated hills somewhere. Then he felt a moment's panic.

If the Russians happened to catch him, as they had caught that German couple, what would they do with Rolland? Would they keep the boy as a sort of hostage? Would they ever allow him to return to England?

He felt the anguish of it already, and he almost told the driver to turn around and go back so that he could rescue his son before it was too late.

'Don't worry about him,' Nina said to him then. 'He'll be all right. He is a very strong boy.' Nina had caught him worrying again.

'I suppose so,' he said, and told himself that the Russians would never catch him, simply because anything he did here stayed in his own mind. That was one place which they couldn't reach, not yet anyway.

*

They could not reach his mind: only Rupert Royce himself could do that. Yet that was not quite true, because J. B. Lille continually reached his mind, and so did Nina and so did Teddy. Did both sides want him? Was he worth such a sharp contest for his sympathy and understanding? Was he worth, for instance, that Russian cheque in his pocket?

Rupert felt now that the battleground for the world was in his own head.

He had asked Nina to take him, as Coleman had suggested, to the top of Ai Petri, and Nina had gladly arranged it. He was now looking thoughtfully at the string of ordinary radar installations which dropped down one side of the high bare slopes of Ai Petri. These were not the big tracking domes Coleman had hoped for, but he knew, by their position, that they were part of a much wider detection system. Their only open ground was south and west. Where were the others, facing east and north? Somewhere

on the other side of these high slopes, perhaps. He could see from up here the white, lacy fringe of the Black Sea shore far below. The valley beneath was hidden under a padded bed of thick white clouds. This mountain-top itself was a gentle grassy plain, with plenty of signs of spidery tracks and heavily worn dirt roads.

There might be the balance of this radar screen just over the hill, even if the big domes weren't there.

'Could we walk over that way?' he said to Nina and pointed to the soft belly of the plain, which dipped out of sight. It was delicate, beautiful country.

'English love to walk,' Nina said, getting up.

'Wait!' Rupert cried to Teddy, who had been lying under a great iron ball on a granite column which recorded some geo-physical year. Teddy had been relaxing in the cool high sun, but he was already uncoiling himself to go plunging down the slope at a very hot pace. 'Let's just stroll down,' he said to Teddy.

'I need exertion!' Teddy said, and before they could argue he left them standing and began leaping and skipping down the slope like a gazelle.

After their fishing expedition Rupert had learned that this effervescence in an otherwise calm man was part of Teddy's medical theory for good health. He was not only a dietician, he was an expert in the human condition, in athletic fitness. His theories were practised by Soviet sportsmen and by specialist workers in various fields including, it seemed, the men who worked in the frozen north. Relax when inactive, exert the body to its maximum when in action. The extremes, Teddy had explained, were dialectically good for the body. It was a good Marxist principle, practicably applied.

Rupert watched Teddy's daring course downwards and realized he himself knew nothing about Marxism, from its own point of view.

'Can your Marxism be applied to everything?' he had already demanded of Teddy, 'even to the elaboration of exercise?'

'To everything!' Teddy had replied firmly. 'Particularly to the human body. The body is, in fact, the apotheosis of Marxist theory.'

'You don't say,' Rupert had replied lightly.

'In fact, it is really the point of it all. What does our struggle come down to? The human form and the human soul. That is the unity of the opposites in us. The very movement of life! Isn't it true that we are moving towards death at life's inception? That is a Marxist view of movement, of society, of change, of dynamics, of living . . .'

'That's too materialist for us,' Rupert had argued. 'There ought to be more besides the body, and something bigger than the movement towards death, surely!'

'Of course,' Teddy had said calmly. 'That's the point. Isn't there life between birth and death? What could be more spiritual and more satisfying than that?'

Teddy's leaps down the hillside were the proof he offered for his theory on abounding life, and Rupert (also a theorist) could not help admiring him.

'One day,' he had said to Teddy, 'you had better tell me about your Marxism and communism. I know nothing about them.' He also realized that he knew nothing, theoretically, about capitalism either. Yet weren't these the two worlds in conflict? Weren't they the reason why he was walking down this slope to look over the other side of the hill to see if there were any more radar sites, or perhaps a barbed-wire fence or something else which would be important to J. B. Lille's view of this subtle war?

When he reached Teddy, he looked casually over the slope and Teddy said slyly, even knowingly to him: 'You see, Rupert? There is nothing here. Only the grass and the hills, and down there—the sea.'

Chapter Thirty-two

He had received a telegram from Jo, telling him that Tess was much better. Should they come back? He could not reply yes or no, because he could not make up his mind. He was in a small post office in Yalta, under an avenue of acacias, sitting out on the wooden first-floor balcony overlooking the narrow Russian street and writing a temporizing reply to Jo, when a woman sat down opposite him at the small, ink-stained, deal table.

She tore a little piece of blotting-paper from the half-moon-shaped blotting instrument and wrote something on it and pushed it carefully but unobtrusively in front of Rupert.

‘Are you American?’ it said in Russian.

Rupert looked up, noted the pale and secretive eyes of the woman and noticed also that she held a handkerchief to her mouth as if to hide the best part of her face.

‘*Nyet*,’ Rupert wrote on the blotter and left it where it was. ‘*Angliski*,’ he added as an afterthought.

The woman screwed up the paper and soaked it in the inkwell to obliterate all writing, and Rupert finished his telegram, telling Jo he would telephone her again, and he looked down the street for Nina. She had gone to buy fruit from a nearby market, and he was waiting for her to return.

He joined the queue to send the telegram and waited for the girl to count it and argue over it. He paid the money, which he had cashed the day before in traveller’s cheques, and he went back to the balcony where the woman was sitting as if waiting for him. She half-sat on the balustrade, hiding her face, and she said softly in Russian:

‘Will you let me ask you something?’

‘Please,’ Rupert said in Russian.

‘Can you help me to make contact with my son in America?’ she said.

‘Why?’ Rupert asked, looking at her. ‘Don’t you know where he is?’

‘Yes. But it is difficult for me . . .’

She told Rupert in nervous, broken sentences that she had just come out of prison, that she had been in prison since the war. Why? She was a Ukrainian who had married an Austrian soldier during the occupation. She was only nineteen then. Why had everybody objected to that? She had given birth to a son and then gone to live with her Austrian husband in southern Poland. When the Red Army eventually arrived, her husband had run away with her baby son and left her sick in hospital. The Russians then sent her back to her village, and the women had accused her of collaborating and she had been arrested and imprisoned.

‘Why?’ she said, her eyes staring at Rupert. ‘I would like to ask them why they did it. What was wrong with me marrying an Austrian soldier? He was not a German. I would like to ask Comrade Khrushchov why they kept me so long in prison.’

‘And your son?’ Rupert said in his hesitant Russian.

She had forgotten her son for the moment, and she looked around her carefully and said, ‘I know where he is. In America. These people want to help me.’

She put her free hand out carefully and unknotted her fist, and Rupert took a piece of paper and read the address of a Seventh Day Adventist organization in Wichita, Kansas.

‘What can I do?’ he asked. ‘Is your husband there also?’

He realized that he had said ‘*mish*’ which meant mouse, instead of ‘*mouj*’ which meant husband; but she did not smile.

‘Yes. He has married again. But it is my son. I want to go there. Can you help me? Can you do that, so that I don’t get into trouble?’

He was suspicious of a trap, and he asked her more questions. He did not understand all her replies but he understood that she could not work because she had been in prison, she had no papers, and she did not even have a permit to live in Yalta. She had nothing and could get nothing, and she would be sent back to her village if the police found her. There they hated her, and they would find some excuse to imprison her again.

Rupert saw Nina coming down the pebbly street under her white sunshade, and he said to the woman, taking a chance on her honesty: ‘Where can I find you?’

'No, no,' she said. 'You cannot. I will be here, in this post office. I will wait for you.'

'But I may never be able to come back here. What is your name, your address at least?'

She put her handkerchief down and he saw the rest of her face, which seemed white and shrivelled as if it had been permanently hidden, and she gave him another slip of paper with her name but no address on it. She told him that he must do everything quietly, unobtrusively. Could he write to the Seventh Day Adventists and tell them to help her? They knew where she was. They had contacts.

'I'll try,' he said, and he left her abruptly because Nina had entered the Post Office and would be climbing the stairs. He did not want Nina to see him talking to the woman.

Though he now dismissed the idea of it being a trap for him, he did not feel attracted to the woman; and he could imagine what collaboration had meant to villagers who had seen what the Germans could do to them; how bitter the feeling must have been. But why, if she had been punished, should she still be disabled? Why not let her go to America to find her son, or make some kind of contact with him?

They were sitting on the balcony of his apartment that night watching the frontier guards on the hill stabbing the black night with their searchlights, searching the dark sea for spies, for provocateurs, for secret submarines. Without giving Nina or Teddy her name, or where he had seen her, he took a chance and told them her story, and he asked them why they still penalized a woman after so many years, and what would they do about it.

Nina responded as he expected her to, and yet he was disappointed.

'She is a terrible woman. She should not have approached you.'

'Why not? How can you say should or should not in this case?'

'She should not have taken her problem to a foreigner.'

'Who else could she take it to? Obviously no one else will help.'

'You are a guest, and . . .'

'You don't make such nice distinctions when your life is at

stake,' he said. 'Anyway, she wants to leave Russia, so she's not going to respect your conventions about guests.'

'Then she should not ask for pity.'

'Oh, come on, Nina!'

'She should go back to her village and try to rehabilitate herself. People will help her.'

'After fifteen years in jail, she probably hasn't the courage.'

'She should not have asked you,' Nina said stubbornly.

'Nevertheless she did,' he said with the same stubborn heart. 'And I intend to help her.'

Nina blushed—her normal response to a difficult situation—and she said angrily. 'You must not . . .'

'Why not? Why shouldn't you allow her to leave the country if she wants to?'

'Because she would say bad things, and your newspapers would make terrible propaganda. She is simply not a good person.'

'All the more reason why you ought to get rid of her.'

'That's cruel,' Nina said.

'But *you* are cruel. After all, she's a human being.'

'All people are human beings!' Nina growled at him. 'Even Hitler was. But you must make up your mind which are good human beings and which are bad ones. It is no value in itself to be human.'

'Well, this one seems to be pitiable to me,' he told her, 'and I must warn you, Nina, I'll do something for her when I leave here.'

'I can't stop you,' she said, 'but if you tell me her name I will see if I can help her.'

Nina was asking a great deal when she asked for that name. Did she see the doubt and suspicion in *his* mind now? Did she ~~see~~ his distaste for doing such a thing—his mistrust?

'I couldn't do that,' he said slowly.

'You don't trust me?' she said bitterly.

'I trust you,' he said, 'but I don't trust your morality in these things. It's too singular, too easy.'

'Then you help her by all means,' she said sharply. 'In the west you all feel pity for the people who, once upon a time, tried to destroy and annihilate a large part of humanity. And you too.'

'You have to forgive sooner or later,' he said.

‘By all means,’ she replied, ‘but you don’t have to restore.’

Below, on a cement circle, the cultural director of the sanatorium was teaching couples how to dance under the bright string of lights, while a three-piece orchestra and an accordéonist played a sentimental Russian song about the Black Sea.

‘One two three, one two three . . .’

Sasha, the cultural director, waltzed a young girl around the cement floor and they could hear the irritating collective scratch of the dancers’ shoes.

‘Tovarishi!’ Sasha shouted, clapping his hands. ‘Now all together again.’

Nina and Rupert looked at each other over the quiet surge of the dark dancers, the dark sea, the dark hills, the flimsy warm music, and they tried to grasp at each other’s morality. It was Teddy who noticed it, and it was Teddy who could ask himself how he could solve their puzzle for them. What were their different intentions, anyway? Was one of them high and the other one low in nature, was one self-seeking and the other humane, one vulgar and the other dreamily idealistic? He knew it was not like that at all. They were both hopeful idealists from two different worlds, he decided, and they were now facing each other and arguing over some wretched woman; and yet they were looking for an understanding they could not reach or an aim they could not agree on.

‘I wonder what will happen,’ Teddy asked himself slyly, ‘if these two ever do see the same light in each other’s eyes?’

He pushed back his cane chair. ‘Why don’t you go below and dance?’ he said to them.

‘It’s years since I danced,’ Rupert replied.

‘It is better up here,’ Nina said.

Nina had been resting on a polite but resentful silence, but now she recovered her nerve and she turned again on Teddy and said:

‘Feodor Nikolai’tch! What do *you* say about this woman?’

Teddy’s romancing was shattered, and he laughed and said, ‘Nothing.’

‘But you know what such people mean to us,’ she insisted.

‘That’s true,’ he agreed, and said to Rupert: ‘The trouble is that it isn’t simply one woman. One woman you meet like that—

who married a German during the war—means to us what all of them meant to us in the war. It was a terrible betrayal.'

'You see!' Nina said to Rupert. 'Even Feodor Nikolaievitch agrees.'

'Then why don't you shoot her and solve her problem that way?' Rupert said harshly. 'You might as well, if you don't give her a chance after you've punished her.'

'That's true,' Teddy said. 'But this woman isn't a big problem for us now. Not that kind. They mostly deserved what they got.' He shrugged. 'Let her do what she likes. The ones we think about now are the innocent people who were imprisoned and even murdered by some of our own leaders after the war. They are the ones we are all worrying about now.'

'Feodor Nikolai'tch!' Nina said angrily.

Teddy didn't take any notice of her. 'We have to face it sooner or later. Many innocent people suffered.'

'Why must we talk of that?' Nina cried.

'Because he must know about it, perhaps more even than we imagine,' Teddy said calmly. 'Let us not hide anything any more, not from our friends anyway.'

Rupert felt the jolt of that phrase again and all that it meant to these people. Was he a friend? He was a friend of this night, of these two people, of Sasha below, and the dancers who were now playing games; and he was a friend of Tatyana, the girl who brought his meals and who had been weeping in her hands this morning, because someone had telephoned that her small nephew, Kostya, had been rushed to hospital, 'poisoned' by tinned fish. When Tatyana had telephoned the hospital they had said: 'There is *some* hope.' She was almost insane with grief. A few hours later Kostya was safe, and Tatyana was a wonderfully happy girl again. She had sat down at the table with Rupert and wiped her eyes and sipped coffee with him and told him about her life. She was twenty-three. Her husband had been killed, up on the village street a year ago, by four soldiers of a punishment battalion. Her husband had previously telephoned the commanding officer of these road soldiers when four of them ('Not Russians!' she said) had walked into the shop where he worked and had taken all the vodka and walked out without paying. They were punished. They had got word to her husband that they would wait for him.

The husband knew they would kill him. They came back one night and caught him in the village street and mutilated him, and he had died of shock. Did Tatyana hate her country or blame its communism for this monstrous piece of violence? It had obviously not occurred to her, and she had defended her people and her country and its society against Rupert's J. B. Lille questioning. Tatyana had worked her heart out and had broken all the rules of the sanatorium to see that Rupert was given hot meals in time, and all in one piece. It was hard work, but he understood work and respected it; and she was a bright and intelligent girl. But she was not in any conflict with the world she lived in. She was, in fact, one of its ardent supporters.

Was Tatyana a friend? Of course she was a good friend now. So was Nina, so was Teddy. But these were all persons, not systems or ideas—which was what Teddy and all Russians really meant when they said '*You are a good friend.*'

He was still not a good friend of their system. He denied it, once again, privately and determinedly in his own heart.

Nina sensed his firm rejection. She knew now. And she said to Teddy: 'How can he be a real friend, when he doesn't even understand us?'

'How can he understand us if we don't tell him the truth?' Teddy replied.

'What truth?' she demanded. 'Who will decide so easily what truth he wants to hear? Does he want *his* sort of truth, or ours?'

'Let him decide for himself,' Teddy said. 'If he is an honest man he will understand the best and the worst and then work it out, in the long run.'

'We don't understand the worst ourselves,' Nina said fiercely. 'How can he—if he hears it in little pieces, and in crude exaggerations?'

Rupert listened to them fighting quite bitterly for his goodwill. Even here there was division, and he wondered again if it was worth it, for one man. Why was he so important? Why had they given him two people to guide him? Or was it to watch him? Nina was still suspicious, and Teddy (no matter how good a friend he had become) was still his official shadow. Hadn't he almost admitted it yesterday with his remarks on Ai Petri?

The thousand swallows nesting in the Greek cornices above

them stirred restlessly. Below, Sasha and his dancers were sending up waves of high-pitched Russian laughter, up over the lights. The dancers were playing a game, and Rupert put his chin on the still-warm balustrade and looked down on them and saw Tatyana, his waitress, who was laughing and dancing with the guests, forgetting, for a little while anyway, her mutilated husband for whom she had wept so bitterly this afternoon.

'There's Tatyana,' he said to Nina to make friends again.

Nina liked Tatyana, and she leaned over and called out 'Tanya!' and waved. Tatyana looked up and called 'Nina!' and pointed them out to her friends and waved, and Rupert was wrapped quite suddenly in their private, unburdened, Russian affection. It was always close and attached, and alive with something quite intangible. That was the elusive and uniquely Russian part of it.

'You're right about one thing, anyway,' he found himself saying to Teddy under its unusual influence.

'Yes?' Teddy said. 'About what?'

'It's something you Russians have,' Rupert said. 'It's something you Russians do to life to make it such an extraordinary gap between birth and death.'

Teddy laughed. 'Is that good?' he asked.

'I suppose it is,' Rupert said, but he was thinking of J. B. Lille.

Was this what J. B. Lille meant—this surprising little view of the Russian character? Perhaps! But Rupert already doubted it. There was more to the Russians than these elusive and almost mystical undertones; and Rupert felt, for the first time, a hint of what J. B. Lille was really looking for.

He saw quite clearly what a powerful weapon it would be, in the hands of any Intelligence service, to know the essential and true character of a potential enemy; not the superficial and rather opportunist guesses which most Intelligence agents would make, but the genuine source of what in fact made a nation a nation—what the Russians would undoubtedly call their Russian soul, although heaven knows what the English could call it. Did the English even have an unembarrassing word for this sort of thing?

In fact the embarrassment was part of the difference, and perhaps that was also one of the shortcomings of the English

character which J. B. Lille was trying to overcome in his search for the true sources of this Soviet desire to win over the world to their communist ideology.

*

In the morning, Rupert again shouted to Jo across the lowlands of Europe. He told her not to come. He said he had almost finished what he had come here to do. He would go to Sevastopol (he had pressed for that) and then, he hoped, to the Island of Achilles. It was hardly worth while for her and Tess to set out on that long journey. They would have a month together in France when he came back. *How was Rolland?* she asked. He did not tell her that Rolland was in a children's camp, and he felt guilty afterwards for playing secrets with Jo. But how could he explain it on the phone? Everything therefore seemed settled when he shouted goodbye and hung up.

They were due to leave for Sevastopol in two days' time, but the next morning, as they returned from the beach, Nina was given a message by Tatyana, who said that the hospital in Gagra had telephoned. Alexei had suffered a serious fall, and she ought to go there immediately.

'But what else did they say?' Nina demanded.

'I asked them everything,' Tatyana told her, always breathless. 'I knew you would want all the details, but that doctor is stupid. She wouldn't tell me anything because I am not a relative. They said you must come immediately. That's all.'

Nina lost colour, and her eyes were suddenly dazed with fear and confusion.

'I spoke to him yesterday on the phone,' she said. 'He *must* be all right.'

'They said he had a serious fall,' Tatyana reminded her.

'He told me only yesterday that he was walking again. What can I do with him?' she cried, exasperated and in tears. 'I should have stayed there and made him rest in bed longer.' But she was already recovering and she said to Rupert: 'It must be serious if they want me, don't you think?'

Rupert nodded. 'I'm afraid so,' he said.

'You know how irresponsible he is about himself,' she said nervously. 'They could never keep him in bed. When he first came home from America I had to sleep in the same room near

him for months, just to keep him quiet and patient. He will never believe that his legs can't work so quickly.'

Rupert suddenly saw through the Soviet veil of Nina's marriage to Alexei. He had watched them together and he had watched them apart, and he had come to the conclusion that the affection was just the same but that marriage here was a far more independent affair than it was in England. Nina had her social duties, as surely as Alexei had his, and they obviously moved in their separate vocations without too many difficult compromises to the demands of their marriage—in the western sense anyway. He did not know what other secret compromises they had to make. Many perhaps. But did this make it less of a marriage and less of a family when the women were so free of their men?

It was hard to tell, because a marriage was always half-hidden in public, and he guessed that Nina, who could still admire her husband despite his foolhardiness, was a loyal wife in the Soviet sense, as surely as she was a loyal wife in the western sense. It was bound to be so, with a woman like her, and he wondered why they had no children. It was hardly typical, because so much of the population of this country seemed to be very young children.

Now he could see that Nina was as worried and as near to panic as Jo would have been under the same circumstances, and he found that he was also worried about Alexei Vodopyanov. Alexei had not occupied his thoughts lately. When he left Alexei, he usually forgot him completely, although occasionally Nina would mention something Alexei had done, or something they had done together. He sometimes remembered, at illogical moments, a particular aspect of their ice journey, or their long winter in the fuselage. He knew that he would also be very unhappy if something serious had happened to Alexei who heated his life with a secret fire and who breathed it in and out with such hot-headed determination.

'I suppose I can't do anything?' he said to Nina politely.

'No, no! I must go to Simferopol now and see if I can get on an aeroplane to Adler. I'll try to telephone the hospital, but it will probably take hours now.'

'Do you think it would do any good if I came with you?' he offered.

She looked at him with gratitude. He understood gratitude, but felt that he did not merit it this time. After all, she was able to cope with her own emotions and her own problems. He thought of Jo and wondered how she would have reacted to a similar situation. Probably the same way. But he suddenly felt (at this late distance) just how hard those nine months of his absence must have been on Jo, and he doubted if he had ever shown enough understanding or appreciation of her predicament. 'Definitely not!' he decided ruefully, regretfully.

'If you want to come, please do,' Nina said to him now. 'Alexei asks about you every time I telephone. I think he must be very bad, very sick. If only he had been patient!' she cried.

'Don't give yourself the evil eye now,' Tatyana said to her. 'It's not that bad. He'll be all right. Look how Vodopyanov and Rupert lived on the ice. It was much worse.'

'Much worse!' Rupert agreed, because Tatyana's eyes had appealed to him for encouragement.

'I must telephone for a car to take us to Simferopol,' Nina said and she hurried away to organize their departure.

They spent the night sitting in a bare corner of the Simferopol airport which looked like a railway station and was filled with patient people. They all had large bundles, or suitcases, or children or food. Planes came and went, but the number of people remained about the same, and Nina and Rupert eventually caught their plane and sailed up into the darkness before dawn.

Nina sat nervously still with her hands gripping a newspaper bundle which had their lunch in it, and she asked him about Jo and about his children. 'I love your son,' she said to him. 'He is such a serious boy and he does something that Russian boys don't always do. He listens carefully to everything you say to him, so that you always feel you are part of his life, and close to him. You know that he showed me a secret passport he had made, for travelling on his own when he ran away from you?'

'Ran away!'

'Oh, but you mustn't take it seriously! He doesn't mean it. All children dream of doing things by themselves. He had made a passport, and he had written his name, height, age and descrip-

tion; and where it said profession, he had written: "Traveller, orphan and bachelor."

Rupert laughed. Well, he also loved his son.

'He is like you, and your daughter is like your beautiful wife.'

How pleasant to hear Nina say '*your beautiful wife*'. How much of a possession 'a beautiful wife' like Jo seemed to be, which could never apply to Nina, he felt sure. Delicate, handsome Nina was too independent to be possessed, if someone wanted to say the same to her.

'Do you have children?' he asked her.

'No,' she said.

He did not ask the next question, because it would have been rude. But she sensed it and answered him anyway.

'I once had a daughter of four years old,' she told him slowly, and they seemed to be so high, so hot, so slow in this plane. 'And I was also going to have another baby, when my daughter got meningitis and died. I was so ill with grief that I had a miscarriage, and they had to cut me inside so much that I will never have children now.'

'That's terribly bad luck,' he said.

'Yes. If it hadn't been for Alexei I would have killed myself in front of a train. He didn't leave me for weeks, and when I recovered he took me back up to the north, where they were flying very dangerous and difficult winter flights to one of our drifting stations, and where he knew I would have to work hard and worry about him and about all the other pilots. I even became a radio operator so that I could follow closely what they were doing.'

He could say nothing adequate, but he asked himself how he had ever got the idea that the Russians didn't have the same emotions as the English. Yet that thought was always in the back of his mind. An extraordinary idea it seemed now, and he remembered something that Teddy had said as one of his sly, pointed jokes:

'Every Russian's life is like a Russian novel. That's why we love the characters in our classical literature so much.'

So far it had proved to be incredibly true.

Alexei was conscious, coherent, but dazed. He was not surprised to see them. Nina had preceded Rupert, and then she had

sent for him. He came into the hospital room (where there were two other silent patients) expecting the worst.

‘Ah! My brother!’ Alexei said weakly but sentimentally in Russian.

He put up his arms, and Rupert was embraced with a force which seemed rather astounding for a dying man. Was he dying?

‘Remember, Alexei, that Englishmen do not embrace,’ Nina said to him, and Rupert already sensed the relief in her voice.

‘They do on the football field,’ Rupert joked, hoping it would serve.

There was no tragedy here, only Nina’s happy anger which was chastising her husband in exasperated Russian.

‘He got up two days ago and tried to kick a football outside,’ Nina told Rupert while Alexei looked on lazily and smiled. ‘He tried to run over stones, and he fell on his head and he was lying unconscious. They thought he was dying. But look at him now.’

‘Why are you so angry?’ Alexei complained, trying to joke, but he was obviously under a strong sedative. ‘Are you trying to kill me?’ His head was in bandages and one hand was strapped up above his head, the other had a firm grip on Nina’s sleeve.

Rupert looked inquiringly at Nina. What was the damage?

‘He broke two fingers,’ Nina whispered, ‘and he cut open his head. He simply won’t stay in bed. He’s like a child. How can he ever get better if he won’t stay still long enough? Alexei!’ she said to him in Russian. ‘Look how you made us come all this way. Why do you do such things?’

‘But I’m all right,’ he said tiredly in Russian. ‘It was bad luck. How nice to see you, Rupert. Eh . . .’

‘You were not supposed to be playing football,’ Nina told him gently.

But Alexei had gone off to sleep with the sort of delight which seemed to lubricate his whole life. He was happy, he was among friends, he was safe. He was indestructibly alive, and he still held Nina’s sleeve with his one good hand.

Nina was full of apologies. The woman doctor had assured her that Alexei was now more or less all right, and would probably be up again in a few days. There was nothing to worry about, she

said, and she regretted bringing them here, but his heart and his breathing had almost stopped when they picked him up. Now he was perfectly alert and alive again, so what could you do with him? The doctor shrugged her white shoulders. Alexei clearly exasperated her. She said that walking was good for him because he must train his muscles all over again; but he must walk with moderation. That was what they couldn't teach him here—a little moderation . . .

‘Nobody will ever teach him that,’ Nina said.

They spent the day in the hospital, they ate their lunch with the doctors and nurses, and then they drove back to Adler and spent another night sitting in the same kind of corner in the same atmosphere of *passage*. They were in the sanatorium by noon next day and Tatyana was happy again. She told Nina that she *knew* it would be so.

Teddy was also laconically delighted, and said that he had arranged for the car to come next day, and they would go to Sevastopol as planned. ‘Unless you are too tired,’ he said to them.

They were both tired and they looked tired. They hadn’t slept for two nights. But what was weariness in this country? It seemed to be something that you passed off as being quite irrelevant. Rupert said he would be ready if Nina was, but he did ask himself tiredly if J. B. Lille and Coleman were worth this effort.

But everything seemed normal again, and the next day, on their way to Sevastopol (where Rupert would meet the sudden threat of real disaster), Nina said she had a duty to perform. She said she must leave him for a few hours at the sea, while she stopped at a small village to give a talk and read to the people who were making new vineyards on the Baidar plateau.

‘Why can’t I come with you?’ Rupert said. ‘Is it allowed?’

She blushed. Rupert knew and realized that he provoked this now because he liked to see it. He liked to see her Russian face spread with that hot glow.

‘You can come if you want to,’ she said.

A motor-bike policeman stopped them as they drove through the archway of the Baidar gates. The gateway was the significant entry to the Crimea itself. Here the road left the sea and turned

inland towards the hills which eventually overlooked Sevastopol and Balaclava and the battlefields of a hundred insatiable wars.

‘Who are you, and where are you going?’ the policeman asked curtly.

Teddy explained casually but impatiently, and they drove on down the valley to a white-fringed basin where, from the side of the gentle speckled hills, they could see miles of new vineyards planted like soldiers on chalky hillsides.

‘They are new since the war,’ Nina said. ‘When we have finished here we will have more wine in this one place than in all France.’

Rupert took all such claims with cynical reserve, but the vines went on and on as far as the eye could see. How had Nina been invited to give one of her cultural talks in this place, he asked.

‘The director is an old friend from the Ministry for the Far North,’ she replied. ‘He’s a good friend, and I couldn’t refuse him.’

They drove through a new village of new square houses under corrugated iron roofs. A dirt road led to a collection of long white buildings which looked like storage sheds.

‘Peace!’ Rupert read aloud.

The red banners of Russia said little else: it was written on walls, in pebbles by railway stations, across city squares, over factories, in daily newspapers every day, and over the gateway of the children’s *artek* where Rolland was.

Several hundred young women in cotton frocks and dirty summer shoes, and fifty men, who wore caps or whose black abundant hair flopped over their foreheads, were waiting for Nina. They clapped and laughed and crowded around her and gave her bunches of flowers. A less concentrated group presented Rupert with sheaves of pink gladiolas, and a woman in a white overall introduced the director, the party secretary, the chief chemist, the viniculturist, the agronomist, the cultural director. Rupert shook hands; Teddy stood back; and Nina was swept forward. They followed with the others to one of the long white sheds which was stacked at one end with sacks and tools and trucks, but at the other end it was swept clean and bare. It had been turned into a huge hall with seats and a stage and a red banner along one side.

'Peace to the world!' Rupert read again, and closed his eyes against it.

Teddy touched his elbow as if he had noticed the reaction and he nodded at another banner. *'We must love labour: Lenin,'* it said.

Was Teddy rubbing his nose in this world of noble work?

Was that Teddy's dry, shadowy humour provoking him again?

'Tovarishi!' a feminine voice cried out. Her high delivery brought the rumbling noise in the hall down to a whisper. Rupert was seated on the stage holding his flowers in the long line of the directors and experts and the party secretary and Teddy. Nina sat in the middle. A small lectern with a microphone was forward where the woman cultural director was introducing their honoured guests.

Prolonged applause for Nina, prolonged applause standing up for their English guest, the hero *Rupairt Royiss*. Perhaps when Nina Sergeyevna Vodopyanova had finished, Gospodeen (Mr.!) Royce might say something to them? Would he? The cultural director turned around.

'Let's wait and see if it's necessary,' he whispered to Nina.

All eyes were on him, but Nina was already taking her place and unfolding a sheaf of papers from a pocket in her skirt. She was very serious.

'Tovarishi!' The register of her voice went up an octave. She turned to Rupert to include him: *'Dear friend!'* she said in English.

Rupert hid his eyes a. I wondered what J. B. Lille would make of this particular fragment: of these hardy young faces, of this slight woman, of this repetitious and perpetual claim to his friendship. It was always embarrassing.

He had lost the thread of what Nina was saying, so he listened carefully. She was talking about the frozen north and the warm south; and about the workers and pioneers of these new vineyards. Their arctic comrades, she said, knew them well, because the north had special rations of these grapes, which were full of glucose and sunshine; and also oranges and peaches from other parts of the Crimea. 'You grow from the sun, and we eat from your work,' she said. They laughed heartily. She went on making these vast, free links between the comrades of the polar ice and

the comrades of the southern sun. 'Socialism', she said often. 'Soviet man', she said very often. 'Communism and the future', she liked very much.

'Do you understand?' the girl in the white coat asked Rupert in a whisper.

'Enough!' he said quickly.

He did not want her to translate. He preferred this haze of semi-understanding, and he pretended to listen intently. Nina was now going to read them one of her own poems.

'I will translate,' the girl in white said to him insistently.

He could not protest or close it off. It was too late. He groaned at the prospect and leaned close to the woman in white.

'You are the mountain streams of our nation,' she began in a flat voice which was not at all like Nina's, who was reading her poetry with a high-pitched lilt and determination.

'Down our great hills you flow by snow, by lakes, by seas, by deserts.

'You change all that you touch, dear comrades.

'You are gods who work for the world.

'Here you dig the new heart for men.

'You are the denial of cruelty, of exploitation, and of the bestial hatred for others.

'You are noble because you believe in nobility,

'You are rich because you defy nature.

'And you will be happy all your lives,

'Because you love and admire your fellow-men . . .'

Nina paused and took a deep breath, and Rupert looked thoughtfully and rather grimly at her back.

'You will always love, because only you know where love is found,' she went on.

'It's in the hearts of lovers who never despair,

'In lovers who are never afraid of one moment of life.

'I ask—who will be father and mother to the children of the world?

'I'll tell you, comrades: only you,

'Who dig the grapes of your motherland, and plant the honour of socialism

'In everybody's impatient heart.

'Your work, dear comrades, is your badge of courage.

‘You are our heroes and our gods.

‘Dear comrades! How can there be a limit to you?

‘When I embrace you, I embrace the whole wide world.

‘How beautiful it is now, to live in peace in our dear mother-land!’

The applause cracked the muffled silence, and Rupert having survived the verse was looking at Nina’s soft and familiar back and feeling, through the flat voice of his translator, something he had not felt before. He could see young women in the front rows with wet cheeks. He did not believe it at first. Yet they had listened so completely, they had been so still and so attached, that he knew it was true.

Had Nina affected them so profoundly?

He felt as if he were affected himself, and when she turned around and looked at him, and he saw her pale face and bright brown eyes, for a moment he caught the glimpse of a woman he had never seen in his life before. But as soon as he recognized her and tried to hold his view, she faded instantly, and he was looking again at Nina’s back and wondering what this world of hers was all about.

He turned to Teddy.

Teddy also seemed to be affected, and Rupert leaned forward and said in Russian:

‘Teddy. Was that really such good poetry?’

Teddy hesitated for a moment and then said in a whisper: ‘I don’t know. The poetry might be bad, Rupert. I don’t know. But it isn’t that. It’s something else.’

Rupert knew that it was Nina herself. It was whatever link she had with these girls in drab summer frocks and dusty shoes and bright Russian faces and simple eyes. They were all Ninas, and she had tracked down whatever it was that they kept locked in their hearts—where they said in desperate secrecy to themselves: ‘That’s what I mean to the world!’

The applause was dying down, and Nina was taking a deep breath. He could see her slender shoulders lift, her rather strong freckled arms tense; and without seeing her eyes he knew they were the moral eyes of a very moral woman.

Teddy whispered to him. ‘And you like it?’

Rupert nodded uncertainly. Allowing for bad translation,

allowing even for bad poetry, he could not argue with the aspirations to nobility, admiration of work, hope for children, and the dedication to a new world you could make for yourself. Who could disagree with that?

'I can't argue with her,' Rupert said, puzzled and irritated for some mysterious reason. 'I suppose I can see what she means.'

Teddy's teasing eyes seemed to laugh, as if something had just happened between Nina and Rupert which he had half-expected. Rupert did not like to see that amused expression on a man's face, knowing that it was a comment on himself. Or it might be a comment on Nina, or even on both of them.

Could the commentary of one bad poem influence him at all? He knew it was hardly possible, and soon afterwards as they continued their journey he deliberately made his first notes with Coleman's invisible-ink fountain-pen, the liquid flowing out like anaemic milk and disappearing on the page.

'These hills,' he began, 'seem to have been made for wars . . .'

They had driven on towards Sevastopol, climbing the ridge which ran from Balaclava in a half-moon curve to Sevastopol. From the top of the ridge, which was now the site of a monument to the Red Army, he could see all the famous Crimean heights and valleys to the south: the Fidukin Heights, the Voronstov Ridge, and even the hills which overlooked Balaclava which (Teddy said suggestively) was closed to tourists. To the north, in a gentle but complex plateau, were Inkerman and Sevastopol, and farther off somewhere was MacKenzie's Farm.

He knew the history of the Crimean War very well, and he looked over these bare hills and wondered how many other wars had been fought on this perfect military playground. On a map it looked like dozens of tangled thumb-prints. There were little heights in abundance, complex jigsaws of gentle ridges and rifts and valleys; and dominating the hills and slopes was this long main ridge which cut off what the British had called the Uplands of Sevastopol from the warlike hills behind, where soldiers had played their man-eating games for centuries.

He looked towards Sevastopol. There must be remnants somewhere of the tramway the British had built from Balaclava to

their rear positions: 'the worst six miles in the long journey from Portsmouth to Sevastopol'. Long before them the Greeks had built a wall across these same Uplands to keep the mountain tribes out of their seaports. Before the Greeks there had been Celts and Scythians, and after them—Romans, Huns, Goths, Mongols, Slavs, Turks, Tartars, British, French, and finally Germans, Spaniards, and Italians. There was not a tree to be seen, not a sign of population or the growth of history, except the Red Army monument on this ridge and the vast new vineyards behind in the porphyrous basin of the Baidar slopes. Two thousand years of wars had left it as dry as the permanent dust of any permanent battlefield, although the earth was obviously fertile and the gentle hills were warm and soft, and begging to be fertilized with life.

He wrote with Coleman's freak fountain-pen between the printed pages of a blue Soviet guide book called *Guide to the Black Sea Coast of the Soviet Union*. Teddy and Nina had gone to see the memorial. Rupert, hating the attempted metamorphosis of all war memorials, had declined and he was sitting in the hot sun on the edge of a shellhole writing for J. B. Lille's world, because his memory had finally failed, and he was beginning to forget too many of his first and most vivid and important impressions.

Here, he noted, the whole country was soaked in war.

Every few feet of these slopes were still mutilated with shell-holes from the last war. Teddy had been a soldier here. 'A tank driver,' Teddy had said. He had fought up and over these ridges; and on the eve of the last battle he said you could read a newspaper at any time of the night because the Russian barrage of guns, mortars, Katyusha rockets, flame-throwers, tanks, grenades and bombs had annihilated every living thing left on these slopes.

'We pushed the Germans onto the Khersones peninsula,' Teddy had told him, 'where you now want to look for your ancient Greeks. We had all of them crushed into a small strip of land: fifty thousand of them with tanks, guns and transport, but with nothing at sea to get them off. We simply hacked them to pieces. My tank was blown up on a German mine in the middle of our last attack. We had over two hundred tanks on a front little more than a kilometre long. We were bumping into each other, and when my tank was hit I leapt out of it with my gunner who was

also alive and got into a German tank with a big hole in the side and a wounded navigator still alive in the front seat. We couldn't wait to get him out. When I was hit again, our own stretcher-bearers couldn't understand how the German and I were sitting together in the same German tank.'

How had Teddy become a doctor from this little portion of the war, Rupert had asked him.

'I was lying in the hospital with friends,' Teddy had explained. 'The war was almost over. They all decided to become doctors. They were all tank men, like me. Some had been tractor-drivers before the war. One had been a train-driver in Odessa, and another one had been an electrician. Five of us went to medical institutes and became doctors. Two went back to driving trucks or tractors. I don't know what happened to the rest of them. A couple of them loved the bottle too much.'

Teddy had flicked the side of his throat with his fingers and said: '*Gazz!*' to indicate drunkards, and he sighed.

He had sighed over these hills, and Nina had listened carefully. Was she gathering material for her new poetry about Soviet man and his socialism, while Rupert gathered material for J. B. Lille's strategy of understanding? Or was it destruction?

This view of the war had depressed Rupert, and he put away his fountain-pen quickly, because Nina and Teddy were approaching, and Nina called out:

'We must hurry, Rupert, if we want to see Sevastopol and Khersones today.'

*

They drove straight into Sevastopol through another police cordon who did not stop their limousine. Teddy told the driver to go as far up the Malakov Hill as he could. This had been the most vital point of the Crimean War, because it dominated the centre of Sevastopol. They walked to the top. The old fort was now a restored museum, the old guns were still in position facing British and French positions to the south-east, and the round hill overlooked the long-necked harbour of the city.

Rupert knew he could be fascinated here, but Teddy urged them to go onto the Khersones peninsula on the far side of the famous, beautiful, waterfront. But Rupert seemed inclined to take his time. He was looking at these hills very carefully.

'There wasn't a building standing in the city when we came in here,' Teddy told Rupert. 'But we rebuilt it completely in ten years.'

They looked down on a totally reconstructed city with white blocks of flats on the outskirts, and Rupert said: 'What's on the other side?'

Teddy said, 'Let's go and look.' But he went on telling Rupert about the city. 'Before the Crimean War this was a beautiful place. After the Crimean War only fourteen buildings were left standing. It took fifty years to rebuild it that time.'

They had already been noticed by the crowds of holiday trippers who were climbing all over the Malakov hillside. A young man came up to Rupert and shook his hand and said in old-fashioned English that it was very rewarding to see him in the hero city of Sevastopol.

'This famous harbour,' Teddy said deliberately as they walked down the hill, 'can still take the combined fleets of Britain and France—and probably the Americans too if they could ever get here.'

They walked down through the gardens, and then down the final slope to sea-level where buses went down to the harbour, which spread out before them now like a blue metallic shield. The city was alive. There were submarines in the docks, and on the walls of the buildings were large maps of Africa showing Africa in 1956 and Africa in 1960, with all the new independent states in black.

Nina stopped to look at one, but now Teddy urged her on. They were walking through the city, and Teddy had arranged for the car to pick them up at the Khersones Museum, which was on the very borderline of Sevastopol and the old Greek peninsular colony.

They walked a long way and they were finally entering the low Khersones Museum of Greek relics when a policeman in a white jacket at the door stopped them and pointed to Rupert and said to them:

'Who is he?'

Nina urged Rupert on with her hand in his arm, but the policeman stopped them sharply. 'No!' he said. 'You can't go in. Who is he?'

'He is the Englishman, Rupairt Royiss,' Nina said in a low angry voice, suggesting that this idiocy should pass quietly.

'Foreigners are not allowed in Sevastopol, and they are not allowed on the peninsula,' the policeman said to her. 'How did he get in here?'

'Wait!' Nina said. 'You must know this man. He is our friend and our guest, Rupairt Royiss.'

'He is not allowed in Sevastopol,' the policeman told her and he added importantly: 'You must not move. You must wait here.'

'But . . .'

The policeman beckoned to her and Nina followed him quickly into the little alcove office of the museum, and Teddy sat on a small post outside and wiped his hot face, hardly interested in this casual though surprising dispute.

'Am I not supposed to be here?' Rupert asked him in Russian. 'Didn't someone get permission, if it is a closed city?'

'Nina Sergeyevna will settle it,' Teddy said.

Nina could not settle it. Rupert was worried and angry when he heard them arguing fiercely inside the alcove and he said to Teddy: 'Well, let's go, if it's forbidden.'

'No. Let's wait and see what happens,' Teddy said calmly.

The policeman and Nina came out, and Nina was red-faced and furious. The policeman walked straight up to Rupert and said to him:

'You must come with me.'

'Where to?' Rupert demanded in English.

'He is the one man in the entire Soviet Union who has never heard of you,' Nina said nervously.

'Where does he want me to go to?' Rupert asked again.

'To a police post.'

'I'm damned if I'll do that,' Rupert said. 'If it's forbidden, if I'm not allowed here, then let's get out of the town altogether.'

Nina translated this to the policeman who had pulled his cap firmly on his head and he snapped back, 'Nyet!' He said Rupert must go with him.

'But I spoke to the party secretary myself this morning,' Nina told him.

'A law is now a law,' the policeman told her without taking

his eyes off Rupert. He had called a blue police car, and the driver stopped near them. 'You must come,' he said again to Rupert.

'Feodor Nikolai'tch!' Nina appealed. 'Please say something to this man.'

'If he is so ignorant, there's nothing I can say to him,' Teddy said casually. 'You go with him,' he told Rupert, 'and I'll find the party secretary and straighten it out.'

'I don't feel like going in a police car anywhere,' Rupert said. 'If I am not wanted in Sevastopol why doesn't he at least let me get out of here?'

'And he's a guest!' Nina repeated.

The policeman was also becoming impatient. He had ignored Nina. Now he turned on her and said he would take her off first if they did not obey, and Rupert—understanding it—said: 'Oh, for heaven's sake. What's all the fuss about?' He got into the blue Pobeda and Nina got in with him and they drove off with the policeman next to the driver. Teddy walked unhurriedly across a cobbled road, so that Rupert felt a tremendous suspicion mounting in him about Teddy. If Teddy had been going into genuine, uncoiled action, he should have been running as fast as he could go down the slope.

They went up a hill to a small clean street, they got out and went into a cracked doorway and up some stairs into the sort of office which policemen everywhere inhabit: bare floors, and rooms with naked tables and a barrenness that is neither administrative nor businesslike nor quite human. The policeman opened a door and showed them into a small room with a desk and two chairs. But he held Nina back.

'Citizen,' he told her. 'You come with me.'

Rupert had not yet experienced any real feeling of panic, but when he had waited alone in this room for a quarter of an hour, he began to worry. He was about to open the door when a policeman walked in and took off his cap and sat down at the table and offered Rupert a cigarette, which he refused.

'You speak Russian?' the policeman asked. He was young and neat and his black knee-length boots were not dusty. He was an inside policeman, an officer if the stars on his epaulettes meant anything.

'I speak it badly,' Rupert said. 'Where is Madame Vodopyanova?'

'She is well,' the policeman said. 'Why are you in Sevastopol?' he asked.

'I am a guest,' Rupert said. 'Ask my Russian friends.' (He wondered then why they hadn't taken Teddy in as well. Why had they let Teddy go off so easily?)

'Why did you go straight to the Khersones Museum?'

'We did not,' Rupert replied firmly. 'We went first to Malakov Hill.'

The young officer smoked, never shifting his determined man-trapping eyes from his victim. This man obviously didn't know who Rupert was either.

'Would you stand up, please?' he said to Rupert.

Rupert got up reluctantly. He had been sitting on his guide book, and the officer leaned forward and said, 'What is that book, Mr. Royiss?'

So he has heard of me! Without touching the guide book, Rupert told the policeman what it was.

'Let me see it,' he said.

Rupert picked it up, and now he felt the great danger of his predicament. He had written over several pages of the book with Coleman's trick fountain-pen. Phrases came upward to his mind: *Sevastopol is still open to a thousand approaches. Balaclava is closed to everybody. There are no signs of permanent defences on any of these slopes.*

They were all fairly innocent comments, meant for J. B. Lille rather than Coleman. But it was more serious than that, because the sort of tests which any acute counter-Intelligence would make on such a book would certainly reveal that he had been making notes with invisible ink. That in itself would imply something much worse, and it would probably be enough to condemn him.

He was tempted to hide the pen, which stuck out of his shirt pocket, but he sat on his hands and warned himself not to panic. A great deal was at stake here.

'In English!' the officer said, leafing through the book. He read a caption under a picture in fairly good English: *Children bathing under the eye of a doctor. Yevpatoria.*

If he held up the pages to the light he would surely see the

impression of writing, even though Rupert had written as lightly as possible. What a stupid and idiotic and even childish device it was. Was this how the world would be decided, by ridiculous tricks like this one?

'In Yevpatoria, near the goods station,' the officer said as he looked at the picture of the town in the book, 'there is a monument to the Russian heroes who fought the British and French in 1854. It is a very old town. Will you go there?'

'I'm not sure,' Rupert said.

'It is now a town for our children. It has the loveliest climate in our country. There is no dust in the sand, there are no factories near it, and the temperature is always perfect. Every year, over one hundred thousand of our children go to Yevpatoria for holidays by the sea.'

Rupert nodded. The officer was flicking through the pages of the guide book, looking at the pictures as he spoke, then looking up at Rupert.

'Didn't you know that Sevastopol was closed to foreigners, Mr. Royiss?' he asked.

'Yes. But I thought we had permission. That is not my . . .' He could not think of the word for responsibility, so he said 'work' instead.

'And Khersones?' the officer said. 'Did you know that the peninsula is closed to everybody, even Russians?'

That was finally an unwitting but perfect confirmation of everything young Coleman wanted to know; and on this level J. B. Lille would also be pleased about it. If the peninsula was closed, even to Russians, then it was obvious that something very important was installed there.

'No.' Rupert groped about for Russian and managed to say, 'Unfortunately it was Khersones I was most interested in. I came to Soviet Russia to see ancient Greek colonies. The Khersones peninsula is one of the best.'

'I see.'

The book was still in his hands. He said, in English, smiling pleasantly: 'You wait a moment, please.'

He took the book and went out.

Rupert's fingers went up to his trick fountain-pen. He disciplined himself and left it alone. But he could not discipline the

fears which began to gnaw away his calm. His stupidity overwhelmed him. He remembered the Germans they had arrested. He remembered Coleman saying: 'They have all kinds of tricks to discover what you are really doing.' Guilt was already confusing him, because he was thinking of Rolland. It would be Rolland who would suffer most for this. So would Jo and Tess, but at least they were safe. And even Nina. Teddy he hated. Teddy was probably responsible for this. Teddy seemed to have had a hand in planning the operation, leading him right to the very doorway, and then withdrawing. Nina was probably innocent and could hardly be blamed, and no doubt she would get out of it. As for himself . . .

He allowed his mind to torture his conscience for ten minutes, taking it as his just deserts. He deserved the worst for being so clumsy.

Then the door opened, and this time it was Nina.

'Rupert!' She approached him as if he had just escaped a disaster. 'I am so upset!' she said, and her moral and simple Russian eyes were asking his forgiveness. 'It is my fault. I didn't say anything about Khersones when I rang the party secretary. I thought it was all part of Sevastopol. How can you forgive me for being so stupid . . .'

'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'Can we go now?'

'Yes. Feodor Nikolaievitch went to the party secretary, and he telephoned here. He told Feodor Nikolaievitch that Khersones is closed, even to him. It is a military area. I didn't think. It's a bad Russian habit. Sometimes we forget little details like that. We lose sight of everything because we think it is all right in our minds. I was terribly careless. I am so sorry.'

'Don't worry,' he told her, and the policeman who had originally brought him here was standing behind her looking shame-faced.

'I got so angry with this man for not knowing you,' Nina said and turned on the policeman. 'He should have known who you were. I can't understand it. It seems impossible that he doesn't even read the newspapers. He should have simply told us we could not go in to Khersones, instead of bringing us here.'

'Never mind,' Rupert said, very anxious now to get out. 'Let's forget all about it.'

'But we can see the rest of the city. I have that much permission now. We must go to the diorama of the Crimean War and see that.'

'No, no. Let's go back to the sanatorium,' Rupert said.

'But please stay!' Nina said as they hurried out of the police station. They were on the stairs, and the policeman was following them. 'I'll never forgive myself if you don't see something here.'

Rupert held her arm. 'The officer who questioned me took away my English guide book, the one I bought in Yalta. Could you get it back for me?'

Nina turned to the policeman and asked him from the authority of her superior and corrected position. The policeman went back into the bare rooms and they waited again, while Nina held his arm tightly and looked attentively at him to see that it had not upset him too much.

That friendly contact of her arm was now beginning to affect him.

The policeman came out and said, 'The officer who took your book has gone off duty. We can't find the book. When he comes back we will post it to you at the sanatorium.'

'But I need it now.'

'We can easily get another copy,' Nina told him.

Rupert's dilemma was not so much the rescue of the book but the need to think clearly, without panic. Was he exaggerating it? Was it possible that this was all innocent and exactly as it appeared on the surface, or were his deeper suspicions justified? If they were, he should get the book back at all costs.

'I need that book,' he said to Nina.

'But why? We can get another one.'

'I don't know why, Nina. But I would like it back.'

She tackled the policeman again. He disappeared again. He came back and said they had telephoned the officer. The officer said he had left it on the desk, but it was no longer there. It had been mislaid.

Rupert knew then that it was hopeless to make a point of it—dangerous even; so he shrugged off his fate and said, 'All right. But let's go to see this diorama and then come back here and see if they've found it.'

'That's a good idea,' she said. 'But we could even get another

copy of the book here. I'm sure we could. The bookshops must sell them.'

'In English?'

'Of course. Our students use them too.'

Rupert was sweating now, and Nina was looking at him and recognizing that he was very upset.

'Please don't let it upset you. We are sometimes stupid. Don't let it upset you.'

He took Nina's arm and they almost clung to each other as they walked downstairs, with the policeman obediently following them. In the street Teddy was already sitting calmly in the front seat of their limousine, and he was reading a small blue book. Rupert's heart leapt, because it was obviously his guide book.

'Teddy has it?' he blurted out to Nina.

Teddy's lazy eyes lifted. He looked casually at his book. 'I found a copy of it in Russian,' he said. 'I didn't know that Suvorov had named Sevastopol, which means *beautiful city* in Greek. Did you know that?' he asked Rupert as they got into the car.

'No, I didn't know that at all,' Rupert said angrily.

The policeman outside saluted as they drove off, and Nina's eyes and lips tried to maintain her bad temper and contempt but she forgave him: she smiled and said goodbye very formally.

But Rupert was trying to fathom Teddy. How innocent, or how cunning, was this strange man? How deliberately had he arranged this little scene? How much did he know or guess? And why did he buy that same guide book in Russian? He could see nothing in that dry, clear face to suggest guilt. But probably they could see nothing in his own English face to suggest his own guilt either.

'God Almighty!' he protested to his brain. 'How did I get into this sort of a mess?'

The mess was mental, he knew that much. It was the war of the worlds in his own head; he knew that too.

The car took them up another hill, and they got out and went into a circular building and looked at a big naturalistic, circular, panoramic painting of the defence of Malakov Hill, with every detail of the Russian defence recorded: soldiers, guns, piles of cannon-balls, bloody-aproned doctors, the wreckage of dugouts, massed troops, Russian soldiers, a green-uniformed General,

and below and all around the hill the British and French brigades massed and waiting or attacking under white puffs of fire. It was so naturalistic that Rupert felt for a moment as if he were enclosed on this hill with these rackish defenders.

‘War, war, war!’ he reminded himself sadly. ‘This whole country was made for war.’

The wars of one century overlapped into another, and the blood of so many different soldiers had made a terrible mess of these pleasant hills. They went outside. It was a relief to be in the hot, late peaceful afternoon sun. They went back to the police station, but the book was still mislaid. Nobody knew where it had gone, although they promised again to send it on.

Rupert decided then that he would leave Russia immediately. He would fly home tomorrow. He would get out before they could discover and read those particularly anaemic and stupid and perhaps cruel remarks written over the pictures of children in white hats bathing in the sea at Yevpatoria: that their bare countryside was a natural arena for slaughter and bloodshed.

Chapter Thirty-three

But he changed his mind about leaving when he had calmed down.

He could not allow this sort of fear and guilt to defeat him so easily. At three o'clock in the hot morning, lying awake in the sanatorium and listening to the Black Sea washing away its heart on the beach below, he had felt several thousand years of fear in him. By seven o'clock the same morning when he was up and shaved and bathed and standing over the cliff looking at the now flat, cotton-wool water, he knew he could not retreat.

It might be foolhardy, he might be caught, but he could not run away.

He would only leave when he had seen Achilles Isle—Leuce—which was what he had come here to do, although Nina was still having difficulty. She said it depended on the fishing fleet. Nobody else went near the tiny island, and so far there was no sign that any of the trawlers would ever pass near it. Nina disappeared often to consult her oracle. She was working hard to make up for her mistake in Sevastopol, and she offered him Phanagoria, Yevpatoria (where the children were), Feodosia—and several other famous Greek sites. He said *No, it had to be the island*, and he hadn't much time left.

After all, there was a time-limit to his sense of safety.

Teddy had also disappeared. 'He'll be back soon,' Nina said briefly.

He didn't like that.

But Nina got them a ship, and the way she got it dismayed Rupert and made him so jealous that he knew he must leave Russia fairly quickly, for other and perhaps more dangerous reasons than his missing guide book.

The beach of the sanatorium was divided into two parts: where women could swim and lie naked in the sun, and where men could swim, although they were not allowed to lie naked. Rupert went instead to a narrow little strip of public beach under a red, soft cliff-face where the village boys still passed their rackish time and asked in their deep voices about Rolland. The beach itself was spoiled by abandoned coils of loose wire, and long rows of exposed pipes for the hot sea-water pool which came from a pump-house, on which he would lie reading some of the English books published in Moscow: Chesterton, Wells, Thackeray, Smollett, Fennimore Cooper. They were books he had forgotten and which he would not otherwise have read again in modern England, for lack of modern taste for them. He knew Chesterton well, and he could see why the Russians liked him. They had what Chesterton had called 'the great gusto', the power to live formally yet forcefully, and with something of the beef which was still English in Chesterton's youth. 'Hypocrisy itself,' Chesterton had said, 'was more sincere in Victorian England.'

Nina would try to stay with him on the pump-house—her duty. But the sun would soon frizzle her head and roast her now pale olive skin, and she would retreat to the women's beach where there were shelter and huge sunshades, leaving Rupert exposed to the casual public from the sanatorium or the village who wanted to talk to him, but who were too considerate or too shy to do so.

An exception caught him one morning. He was a stout man who came down from the sanatorium wearing his pyjamas (which was sanatoria's everyday dress), and he would strip off his pants and jacket and plunge in, his blue shorts clinging to his white flabby legs as they shook with effort. He would swim powerfully a hundred yards and then return and sit down near Rupert and tell him from his belly that it was Rupert's duty, when he returned to England, to tell the English people about the Russian people. Peace depended on men like him, and as a Hero of the Soviet Union his opinions would certainly be respected.

Rupert was rude to him. He had almost forgotten that he was a Hero of the Soviet Union, and he did not like to be reminded of it now. But he knew this snug-bodied man was really interested in Nina, who was now, under the sun, blossoming into a firm but

still fragile beauty with a warmer shape and colour than she had had before. Her handsome face was a perfect Russian face, and her arms and neck looked fuller in this pale gold paint which was the most the sun could do for her; but it was better than the pink, pale, freckled white she had been.

Nina despised their visitor. 'He is a low lady's man,' she told Rupert in her most moral voice. 'He flirts with every woman in the sanatorium.'

Lying in the shade of the women's beach, she had heard the light-minded women gossiping about him.

'Terrible stories,' she said to Rupert.

'Is that what you do on that beach? You gossip?' Rupert teased.

'Women always talk like that when they are idle,' she said. 'So do men.'

But Rupert had not failed to notice that in this nation of the working classes there was already a sort of bourgeoisie, and that it seemed to fill this sanatorium. Many of the women were a curious reflection of it. They not only gossiped but they had the faces and the figures of acquisitive women anywhere, and so did this fat swimmer who had told Rupert his duty. Their interests were probably small and self-centred, and their small world of privilege (such as it could be) was probably concentrated on over-eating, by the look of them, or of getting the best out of their socialist world without bothering too much about others. They were certainly not dreamers, the way Nina was a starry-eyed dreamer. They seemed to have all the pettiness of the French petit-bourgeoisie, which he had begun to recognize again in some of them, even though they weren't small shopkeepers. By asking Nina, he had learned that some of them were 'administrators', some were minor officials, some were fairly high up in the ministries and factories. The swimmer was a senior official in the Ministry of Fisheries in Odessa.

When Nina heard this, instead of ignoring his talk (as only Russians seemed able to ignore each other without insult) she became attentive. What was he responsible for in his Ministry in Odessa? 'Everything!' he said. Did he have anything to do with the Black Sea fleet? 'Of course.' There must be many ships sailing from Odessa. 'Hundreds.'

Nina stopped being contemptuous of him. As each question unfolded its information, her moral eyes began to flash daringly, and her whole manner became subtly feminine and appealing, and eventually coy.

Rupert watched the transformation with a surprised feeling of anguish. In a few moments Nina was shattering her own image, cracking his moral picture of her high and mighty ideals. He would not have believed it possible, and it hurt him to see it happen so quickly, so casually.

‘Leonid Sergeivitch!’ she cooed. Her eyes were attracting him in an appeal, which was (to Rupert) almost a promise. ‘There must be someone you know in Odessa who can help us.’

‘Of course there is. I will telephone him this evening,’ he said importantly to Nina. ‘You must come to see me.’

‘At what time?’

‘At nine o’clock, after dinner. You will come?’ he said to Rupert.

‘No, thank you,’ Rupert snarled politely.

Leonid Sergeivitch did not hide his pleasure at this hoped-for rejection. He played his eyes on Nina’s face, and Nina returned the glitter of flattery and attraction in good measure, until Leonid Sergeivitch bowed, kissed Nina’s hand, and left them. He walked solidly up the path, the legs of his pyjamas swinging out dramatically with every confident stamp of his pudgy, proud feet.

‘He will help,’ Nina said happily to Rupert.

‘At a price,’ Rupert said dryly.

‘What do you mean?’ She was innocent.

‘You surprise me, Nina,’ he said.

Nina did not blush. He expected her to, but she looked him clearly in the eyes. Was there any explanation of women, he wondered. Would they ever be ashamed of what it was that made men ashamed for them?

‘He will help us,’ she said confidently to him.

‘I don’t think much of that sort of help,’ he said grimly.

‘But you want to go to the island! It’s not so easy to find a ship I must get you there somehow, Rupert.’

‘Not this way.’

‘*Not this way?*’ she repeated. ‘What have I done?’

She was a different woman. She had the same eyes and the

same face, but something had happened. Rupert realized, with a shock, what a high and uncritical opinion he had gradually formed of this woman—of her moral force and conviction in the sort of inspired life he did not yet understand, but which he had by now learned to respect, simply because he could see it through her eyes, her honesty, and her ideal dimensions for it.

‘Are you really going to see this fellow?’ he asked her.

‘Of course. You must come with me.’

‘Not on your life.’

‘But I’ll be afraid with that man alone.’

‘Why the devil do you think he is helping you?’

She shrugged cold-bloodedly. She hated cynicism, yet she could shrug now. He was maddened by the coarse thump of his jealous heart. It also made him suspicious to see her sudden return to simplicity. Again she looked innocent and honest. But he would never be able to believe her face or her manner again. Or were these sudden and revealing and flirtatious tricks the tricks of a woman who did not even know their real conclusion or their final promise? He did not know what to believe.

He picked up his book and his towel and said, ‘I’m going up!’

Before she could gather up her own literature and sunshade and small bag and the apples she had brought for them, he had left her. He trudged up the path in the footsteps of Leonid Sergievitch, whose long-bellied eyes insulted every woman he looked at—surely Nina could see that.

He was restless. He tried not to go on feeling angry about Nina, he waited grimly for Nina’s stout friend to procure them transport to the island, and he decided every day that he must get out of this country the moment he could—although he would go only after he had visited the island. He would not run before he had done that much.

He tried every morning now to read the Russian newspapers. The rest of the world was already a place he thought of as being ‘outside’. Far away on another planet the Russians were winning the Olympic Games in Rome, and the situation in the Belgian Congo seemed to be cracking Africa open far too quickly. Was Katanga part of the Congo? Lumumba and the Russians thought

it was. Britain, America, France and Belgium thought it was not. Gary Powers, the American who had been shot down in a U.2 over the Soviet Union, had been tried in Moscow and sentenced to ten years in prison. Ten years for a spy . . .

Rupert could shrink guiltily into the privacy of his head where they could not reach him, but he could not shrink away that blue *Guide to the Black Sea Coast of the Soviet Union* which some chemist in Sevastopol was probably testing for liquid, invisible, plastic ink.

He also listened to the B.B.C. news every night on a powerful radio he had found in his room. He suspected that they had put it there specially for him, but Nina had taken him to a small party in the room of an armless engineer whose voluptuous wife had to feed him and give him his vodka and brush his hair back because his arms were cut off almost at the shoulders (a war casualty in a country where war casualties were so plentiful and so visible), and in their room he had also seen the same kind of radio. There also seemed to be plenty of others in the sanatorium and in the shops, because he often heard the Voice of America from the balcony, or a Turkish or an English station somewhere below. They played their radios very loud, and didn't seem to care who heard them listening to what.

Another pea for J. B. Lille's psychological pod? He was determinedly keeping J. B. Lille's interests alive now, simply because his own morale needed something. He had decided to tell the Admiral that it was a mistake to mix the two kinds of Intelligence in the one man. To be free in the mind, so that you could absorb into the mind what J. B. Lille wanted, you ought to be able to ignore the sort of crass material which Coleman wanted, because it exposed you too easily to danger, and ruined the very basis of J. B. Lille's more exacting researches. It made the job too hard on the nerves, quite pointlessly, when the nerves ought to be thoroughly relaxed if the Admiral's job was to be tackled properly.

But his nervous impatience at least made him look at Nina more critically: at her innocent behaviour, at her clothes, and at the way she walked. She didn't seem to care about her stockings—if and when she wore them. She did not pick her way around these rough paths the way most western women would. Few Russian women did. Were they less feminine for that? Slowly he had

reversed his judgment about their femininity. They were certainly not the same. It was pointless to look at these well-built, stocky, round women, these country girls with bright faces, or even the more sophisticated women in stylish clothes and compare them with the typists and shopgirls of London. Not many of them here seemed to be typists and shopgirls. The girls all seemed to be students. The young women were factory workers or chemists or engineers or teachers or geologists. On the last bus ride he had taken with Nina he had asked her in a whisper what all these young women in the bus did for a living, and she had gone around (ignoring his embarrassment) asking them in the name of the English *gero Rupairt Royiss* what they did. Six of them were geologists on a hiking holiday, two were electrical engineers, two were language students, four in the same party worked in a canning factory, and two others were trolley-bus drivers from Moscow. There was not a shopgirl or a typist among them. Less paper work, he supposed—less to buy and less to sell . . .

He had also discovered that he was clinically interested in Russian love, and though he was not sure whether this was his own curiosity or J. B. Lille's, he watched young couples in the streets of Yalta or lying on the beach or walking in the cypress gardens of the sanatorium: and wasn't love the same? Love was the same but the lovers were different. Perhaps they were not so knocked about by all the sexual advertising for their sexual life and sexual emotions and sexual plans for the future which his own world now pushed into your eyes, nose and ears. There was not much advertising of sex in Soviet Russia, as far as he could see, so who was going to make the choice between the luscious and sexual temptations of his own world, and the more secretive and unbludgeoned charms of these Soviet *devoshki*?

He felt that he could legitimately make such vast comparisons. After all, he had been brought up in a very sophisticated world—perhaps the most sophisticated of any—and he knew all about feminine worldliness. The flimsy copies of his rich world, which you could see packing the London streets, didn't really count. Some of the originals, however, were monstrous to him. Only the rich knew how ignorant, ugly, bad-mannered, wasteful and silly the rich *could* be. He knew exactly what he was doing when he had left the rich and joined the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois values

were limited, but at least they were more stable and less corrupted, and they did work.

But he had abandoned the bourgeois life when he left the Meteorological Office. It was no longer a logical way of living. He seemed to have abandoned his faith in work at the same time. He already had no faith in money. Nor could he seriously believe in any natural privilege for his own class. That was dead and gone. He even suspected that his unqualified respect for science was being shaken . . .

Why?

There was something in this country which shook old faiths; but he did not know what it was. It was not that they offered something better. He knew that his own world was better than theirs, better fed and better behaved and better educated, although on the evidence of the individual, he was beginning to doubt the superiority of western education. But a few weeks in this country and you felt as if you were locked away on Mars, or isolated at sea for months on a destroyer. Suddenly, under these circumstances, your critical faculties began to function with a sharper edge, and worlds began to change their meaning, as well as ideas and all the lazy acceptance of so many ready-made points of view. Nothing was easy when you were forced to think, and though J. B. Lille had fortuitously provided him with a special way of thinking, a very special sort of curiosity, he knew that he was also stimulated now to question himself, as well as to look cynically at the ports and the radar installations, and at the behaviour of these Russians as the deadly enemies J. B. Lille expected them to be.

What was left of him? Was anything left? And was it worth the tremendous risk of staying here another day, another hour?

He was not sure; but he now longed to be back at home. He was feeling homesick for Jo and Tess, and he was becoming very depressed when Nina hurried excitedly into his apartment with Tatyana and lunch and found him sitting on the warm balcony with his feet up, reading a Russian sort of letter from Rolland and holding up a handful of woodworms he had collected in the morning—trying to entice the dotted line of black swallows to pick at them as they flew restlessly in and out of the Greek cornices of the balcony.

'We can go tomorrow!' Nina told him enthusiastically. 'Everything is all fixed, Rupert. There is a special laboratory boat which sails from Odessa tomorrow night. We can leave Simferopol by air tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, and a Ministry car will meet us in Odessa and take us to the boat and then we'll be on the island after a day and a night. We can't wait for Feodor Nikolaievitch to come back.'

'Where is Teddy, anyway?' Rupert asked glumly, refusing to be enthusiastic about Nina's success with her lady's man from Odessa. 'Where did Teddy go?'

'He went back to Sevastopol,' she said impatiently. 'But he is expected back tomorrow night, which is too late for us. We'll go without him.'

He sat up quickly. 'Why did he go to Sevastopol?'

'I don't know. He had to go there urgently. But we don't need Feodor. We can do this ourselves.'

'Rupairt!' Tatyana called in Russian—in her youthful, breathless, hard-working Russian. 'You must come now. Everything is hot. I've brought soup because it's in a steel bowl which stays hot. Don't let it get cold . . . Please.'

He got up quickly. He obeyed Tatyana. He liked to hear Tatyana call him Rupairt, as if it were a normal way for a waitress to address him. He had asked Nina, as a teasing joke, why Tanya didn't call him *Tovarish* which was more formal and probably more correct under the circumstances.

Nina had said: 'But she loves you! All Russians love you, Rupert. They think of you like that.'

So Tatyana loved him with this vast collection of love, which he was just beginning to feel with enjoyment, but without understanding. He didn't know yet whether it was entirely Russian or partially Soviet, but he did not want to disturb this intimate and very polite relationship with Tatyana by asking her about it. Much better to enjoy her unthinking affection, whatever it was, and he hoped that Tatyana felt his own response to it. In any case it was a puzzling and new aspect of himself which he did not dare investigate too deeply. He didn't want any more complications.

It was simpler to leave this country as soon as he could, and he began to show interest in Nina's plan. He washed his hands, sat down and insisted that Nina sit down and share his soup.

Tatyana said: 'Nina! Why don't you take all your meals here with Rupairt? I can easily bring up two lots of food.'

'No.' Nina was still Nina, still embarrassed by the thought of that much intimacy between them. 'But I will eat soup to keep him company.'

She was irritating. She bothered him. She knew quite well that something had upset him, but she could not believe that it was her light-mindedness with Leonid Sergeivitch, the lady's man. Nor could she know anything of his worries about Teddy and Sevastopol, and that ridiculous guide book.

They were sulking with each other when they caught the early morning plane from Simferopol, and flew very wide of Sevastopol. They put down at Nikolaev which was a dry little airport and then flew on in this fat hot plane to Odessa which was couched under layers of brown dust. It was a big brown city on a brown plain, washed by a shallow yellow sea.

He was polite to Nina, but their old barriers of suspicion were in force again, even though he knew it was ridiculous. 'What a pity,' he thought. Nina was subdued. She deferred to him sometimes for his opinion, but when it meant making decisions about luggage, cars, lunch and movement, she made up her own mind and simply told him rather crisply what they would do. She was a dutious Nina again, but he didn't mind that so much. He wanted no more responsibility now, except to see Achilles Island, to investigate it as much as he could, and then to collect Rolland from his camp and leave this country safely.

'Why are you in such a hurry?' she said resentfully to him once. 'There is still Phanagoria to see. It is by far the most interesting old Greek site on the Black Sea.'

'I think I've already seen enough,' was all he told her.

She did her best to please him (officially), almost to placate him (officially), but she was privately puzzled and disappointed and careful.

'What's happened?' she seemed to say with her querulous eyes. 'Why are you so suddenly cautious with me?'

He knew what she wanted. Always his friendship. But his J. B. Lille eyes were watching defiantly for what might be useful.

Odessa was an open port, but the waiting Pobeda from the Ministry took them from the plane to a Naval dockyard which was fenced in with a high wooden wall, well guarded. Even the car was not allowed in, and they walked the last few hundred yards along the waterfront with an armed guard, passing *en route* half a dozen small submarines moored abreast (all fairly new) and two destroyers, and then by a strange ramp with a high crane which looked like a water-line loading stage for something complicated and heavy. Rockets maybe. Or perhaps it was for unloading diesel engines from submarines. They might be using the new system of extractable engines in submarines, which would be very modern indeed, and the most efficient method of engine maintenance possible: you lift an engine out and replace it with another just as you would in an ordinary motor-yacht. They were building a fair-sized cargo ship using this method in Newcastle or on the Clyde, and it was an excellent idea for small subs like these.

Their own ship was a compact little fisheries research boat by the look of her rig and all her clothes-line paraphernalia. Her captain, who was waiting on her gangplank to welcome Rupert officially, was no more than five feet three or four inches tall and almost as thick across. He looked as solid as the bollard his ship was tied to, and he told Rupert in a slow, rather sardonic voice that he was Kirpotin, the master of this ship. He wore a khaki shirt and trousers and no cap, and he looked about thirty. He showed Nina and Rupert to their common cabin which had four bunks, and while he was still talking at the door to them, explaining the cupboards, Rupert felt the engines turning. They were under way by the time the captain had closed the door and left them to settle down.

Rupert remembered that his Navy friends regarded the Russian Navy with a curious mixture of respect and contempt, because none of them knew much about it. The cruiser *Sverdlov*, which had sailed blind into Plymouth Harbour during the Coronation, had been an eye-opener then in computer-radar navigation techniques. And in view of the atomic ice-breaker they had built, and the superior sputniks that went up and around the earth, it would have been very foolish to doubt that the Russians already

had nuclear subs with nuclear missiles in them, or to think that they were anything but master seamen.

He didn't doubt it, but what he sensed now (and it surprised him) was the logical continuity of Russian seamanship. It was easy to understand why an island like Britain had such a dogged tradition of the sea, yet it seemed just as likely that any country with long shore-lines, like Soviet Russia, would also have a strong taint of the sea in its make-up. Rupert also remembered that most of his friends in the Arctic believed that the Russians knew more about ice navigation than anyone else in the world, and he remembered reading somewhere that their vast fishing fleets were newer and better equipped than any other European fleets. There must be something behind all this, and for the second time Rupert felt that he was on a ship that ran itself—without well-pronounced orders from the bridge, without the clear divisions of upper and lower decks, and without the paraphernalia of authority which was dealt out quietly in all British ships, but which was always in evidence none the less.

At times, the captain seemed to be the only man on board, and he explained in his sardonic way, as if everything in life had disappointed him, that they were only going to pass by Serpents Island (Achilles Isle) because their ship was on its way to investigate some new aspects of pelagic fish-life near the mouth of the Danube.

Herring, he said, was their chief interest. Herring behaved differently in silted semi-sweet waters. Drifters—the open-sea fishing boats which used finely meshed nets and drifted with wind and tide after herring shoals—were not very successful in the Black Sea. There was almost no tide, and most winds were sudden and unpredictable and violent. They were therefore trying to devise a new method of trawling these shallow waters near the Danube, because the herring were beginning to collect there in October. So they were going there now to collect samples of water temperature, salinity, currents and bottom characteristics, as well as samples of the minutiae which the herring lived on.

Nina and Rupert had, by now, forgotten their secret quarrelling, because they were so interested in the laboratories where young women worked over charts and bottles and copper strainiers and scoops. They were both fascinated by this technical work,

although Rupert told himself that it was for different reasons. He was sure that his own interest was practical, and he was sure that Nina's was romantic.

The marine biologist was a twenty-three-year-old woman in a white laboratory coat, and two more chemists were girls barely twenty, and one still wore a flaxen pigtail which kept flopping over her shoulder into a giant galvanized tank where samples of organic life were being tested for the proportion of dead and living matter, because the central basin of this sea was dead, and gases killed off a great deal of its minute vegetable and animal life.

'Everywhere here, on this west side of the Crimea, it is shallow water and living water,' the girl told Nina, her technical confidence already superior to her hesitant youth. 'But south of the Crimea the depth of the sea goes down to 2,500 metres, and on the bottom it is stagnant. It was once a brackish fresh-water lake. Then the Mediterranean broke through and killed off all the fresh-water minutiae, which still lie at great depths and go on decomposing and forming hydrogen sulphide gas, which kills everything it touches. We are always looking for the borderline of life and death in our sea.'

'Our sea . . .' Rupert was always intrigued by this Russian word *nash*—ours—which they attached to people, duty, rivers, friends, futures; and in this girl's lips it meant an intimate and backyard-of-a-sea.

'What about currents?' Rupert asked her.

'They're all counter-clockwise,' she replied professionally. 'And not very fast.'

'Does the Mediterranean still fill the Black Sea?' Nina asked.

'The Black Sea water flows out on the surface of the Bosphorus, and twenty metres below it the Mediterranean flows in. It's a remarkable cross-current.'

The sea had developed a slow, deep swirl, and Rupert could see Nina fighting off seasickness, determined again not to give in to it. The smell of preservatives and chemicals and fish and sea in this little zinc-lined laboratory was overpowering, and he took her outside. They stood in the narrow passage of the deck while she held his arm and took deep breaths of fresh air.

'What happens when you travel about in the far north?' he asked her. 'It must be hell for you.'

'I am always sick,' she admitted. 'But some day I'll get used to planes and cars and ships, and then I'll be all right.'

You could never kill the flower in Nina, he told himself. Her hope for a beautiful future was as sure as her hope for a peaceful stomach. It was all the same woman. Some day (Nina believed) everything would change; everything would become perfect—not least her stomach. He admired her hopeful, pale, unfrightened face once more.

'You're a remarkable girl, Nina,' he said to her, teasing her a little; but she smiled and held him tight, and they were friends again.

*

Rupert slept in the bunk above Nina to avoid embarrassment. He put his pyjamas on lying down in the bunk and called out to her that he was ready. She was still seasick and he did not know whether she had undressed or not, but she turned out the light and the boat washed and slapped and swayed him to sleep. At two a.m. her coughing woke him up, and he leaned over and said to her:

'Can I do anything?'

'I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?'

'It doesn't matter. Are you sick?'

'No. I won't be sick.'

They were quiet in the vibrating ship's darkness. The boat rolled and Rupert guessed that she drew very little water for her length, and she probably had a rounded bottom and a cut-away bow for running up these shallow shore-lines, which caused this terrible swiping movement in any sea.

'It would be nice to love the sea like a sailor,' Nina said weakly to him. 'Instead of hating it as I do now.'

'Sailors also hate the sea,' he consoled her. 'Only a fool would be in love with something that is often so brutal and unmanageable.'

'I am a terrible romantic then,' she said sleepily. He laughed. She said nothing more and he guessed that she was finally going off to sleep.

In the early morning the ship was already lying to anchor when someone shouted '*Tovarishi!*' to waken them. It was still dark. Nina was already dressed, and Rupert dressed and managed to shave, and then they had breakfast of salami and cold pork, while

the disillusioned and clean-shaven captain explained that the sea was calm, the weather good. They would be put ashore on the island as planned and the ship would come back for them at midnight or perhaps early the next morning. Rupert had already arranged the details with the captain, who had wanted to put a seaman off with them, but Rupert had resisted a new shadow of that sort, so the captain had shrugged and said in English: 'Hokay! No sailor!' and they had arranged the rest of it—some food, something to sleep on, a shovel to dig with, and a few cylinders of flares to help guide the ship in when they fired their Verey pistols at midnight to signify their return.

'Don't worry if we are late,' the captain said dryly as if he were bored with all this interest in a pot of dirt sticking up out of *his* sea. 'We will come. We will not forget you.'

He was perfectly serious.

The boat rose lightly, and on the damp deck they could see the island in the powdery pink and yellow sea, the hot dawn sea. It was a small conical island about a mile square, with a low grey cliff face before them and a hill rising up behind it.

'It's so small,' Nina complained. 'I thought it would be much bigger.'

'So did I,' Rupert admitted.

Their gear was in the prow of the boat, and she was now under way. The captain was going to run her ashore. Rupert thought he was approaching at a reckless speed, but when they were almost on the edge of the sandy strip below the cliff face, he suddenly backed his engines, the ship stuttered in reverse and they gently surged forward on one of their own displacement waves which had caught up with the ship, lifting the bow very gently and lightly and high onto the sand.

A single plank, and then another one, was pushed over the prow and though the combination bent under their weight they walked hurriedly down it and picked up their bundles of food and sleeping-bags. The captain had already told them how to get up the cliff face, and the moment they were on the sand with dry feet, the double plank was hauled in and the ship backed off without a seaman stepping off it. The captain was standing alone in the prow looking at them as if they were idiots. They waved, but he ignored them and rolled back to his bridge.

‘Look!’ Nina said, stamping on the sand and making deep footprints. ‘We are alone on a desert island, the only real island in all the Black Sea.’

She waved her arms ecstatically—not for the loneliness or the desertion of the place, but for the extraordinary geography of it. And it was Russian.

‘We’d better find a place to put all this stuff,’ Rupert said and picked up his shovel and the sleeping-bags and put a heavy rucksack with their food wrapped in newspapers on his shoulder. He resisted Nina’s attempts to help, and took the obvious slope up, which mounted the soft cliff diagonally, and he was already sweating with effort before he was halfway up. Nina was far behind. She was shouting up to him happily:

‘It is so nice to be on land again, don’t you think?’

‘Come on!’ he told her.

‘I think I love the Russian earth more than anything else!’ she said and followed him again.

*

By mid-morning Rupert was standing on the top of a soft-headed hill and looking around him at the yellow fuzz of summer grass and at the thousands of birds which wheeled excitedly around the edges of the sea, and he asked himself how he should begin to excavate an island single-handed.

It seemed quite unreal, and yet his whole life might be at stake here. If he could find even a fragment of an ancient artifact, he knew that its importance could easily be so magnified in his own imagination that it might lead to some other future for him quite outside J. B. Lille’s world. After all, the great amateurs of archaeology had, in many ways, been the most fruitful men in the profession, and he was still rich enough, if he wanted to be, to indulge himself in archaeology as a genuine vocation.

In any case, as he looked around him, he felt free and at ease. All threats had suddenly gone. He had forgotten J. B. Lille and Coleman and the little blue book in Sevastopol and Teddy’s mysterious absence. He had forgotten everything that was now cutting his life into difficult fragments, and even Jo and his children seemed far, far away. There was definitely something at stake on this island, he decided, and he allowed the feeling of it to take hold of him rather firmly.

They had pushed their gear into a small hollow in the cliff face, and they had already explored the island excitedly with the naïve delight of youthful pleasure, realizing that they were completely alone in the middle of this warm, grey, green sea. They had a whole day and perhaps a night to enjoy themselves on the island, and though he was very serious about his prospects for finding something, there was also a pleasant atmosphere of picnic about it. They could eat a seaside lunch, then swim, and then lie in the sand and do everything save what he had come here to do.

But he was too practical to enjoy himself so easily, and he began to think of his real duty.

He had come all this way hoping to find some remnant of a temple to Achilles. There should also be a statue to him of ancient workmanship. But the epic legends now had to be separated from the archaeological reality. The mythographers had said that the goddess Thetis had given this island to her son, Achilles, who had once lived on it with a herd of goats. But the older pagan folk-tales, which had probably developed the story of some real hero or some extraordinary warrior, had never made such a sea figure out of their more primitive hero.

‘Probably,’ he told Nina now as they sat in the hot sun on the top of the hill looking all around them, ‘the association of Achilles with the sea grew up later. The Greeks made a god of him, and he was always a favourite in the Black Sea colonies. But I don’t see how they could have ever had the theatres and games in his honour here.’

‘Perhaps the island was populated by fishermen at that time,’ Nina suggested.

‘I doubt it. So far there isn’t the faintest trace of a man-made brick or a cut stone.’

‘They could be buried,’ she said encouragingly.

‘Not very likely. There’s nothing that could have covered any ruins very effectively. In fact the top of the island has probably eroded away rather than covered things up. If there had ever been a village or a temple on it, there would surely be a loose remnant of it somewhere.’

‘Are you disappointed?’ she asked.

He laughed. ‘Not really. It was always a bit of a dream anyway,’ he told her.

‘Then why did you want to come here?’

‘I think I am also a romantic,’ he admitted, as if it were a secret. ‘The trouble is that Achilles is almost too easy to admire among ancient Greeks, which is why it is easy to romanticize him. Mithradates, whom you dislike so much, was a genuine historical figure with the weaknesses of an ordinary man. But Achilles is a demi-god, from a golden age in our history. He was, after all, the bravest and most successful warrior in Agamemnon’s armies. Troy could not be taken without him. They even had to come looking for Achilles before they could start the war. He fought the most ferocious battles against the Trojans, he captured twenty-one towns in nine years, and when Hector killed his friend Patrocles he was so overcome with grief that he challenged Hector and killed him in a remarkable combat and afterwards dragged Hector’s body around behind his chariot.’

‘Awful!’ she said.

‘When he buried Patrocles,’ Rupert went on, ‘he sacrificed twenty slaves instead of the usual animal sacrifice. That is the only remnant of the old barbarism that you can find in Homer, and he is almost ashamed to report it.’

‘But Achilles had the temperament of a child,’ Nina complained.

‘All Greeks had the temperament of children,’ he said. ‘That was part of their heroic simplicity.’

‘And you still admire it? You, who are so adult?’

‘Why not?’ he demanded. ‘We live in a world which has abandoned its values, except money and the worst kind of politics and a sense of violence which has very little to do with individual bravery or honour. There is very little beauty left in our life. There was a great deal of it in their life, despite their barbarous customs.’

‘But you ought to ask yourself why there are no values in your life,’ she said in her most moral voice.

He smiled indulgently. ‘Ah, but we ask ourselves that continuously, Nina,’ he told her. ‘And we find no answers worth a damn.’

‘Then you must look at *our* values.’

‘Oh no!’ he cried. ‘Don’t start that. Your communism has proved worse than capitalism, so don’t preach it to me now.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘On your own admission it has killed thousands of innocent people. Khrushchov himself says so.’

‘Then at least we admit it and try to change it,’ she said, changing her tactical approach but never her moral one. ‘It is only world communism, despite *our* mistakes, which offers people a release from the money nexus you hate, and a release from the causes of misery and war—which is property and exploitation of one man by another. That is still true, Rupert, no matter what your pretences of democracy try to do to cover it up. Who are always the big friends of capitalism? The fascists, and the same men in Germany who put Hitler in power.’

‘Maybe,’ he said, ‘but your cure—the dictatorship of one class over all others—is much worse than the disease it’s trying to correct.’

‘Why is it? Don’t you admire and respect work?’

‘I did once, but . . .’

‘Work,’ she interrupted, ‘should be for everybody’s benefit. How can you people tolerate others exploiting you?’

‘It isn’t quite like that,’ he said good-naturedly, surprised at his own lack of argument. He supposed he really didn’t care enough; and anyway, he could afford to listen. He knew that it was time now to listen to everything. It wouldn’t do him any harm, sitting on top of this remote island with hidden memories of a golden age under his feet, and the very air of another one pounding at his head with ardent theories. But he felt safe. She could never reach his sensibilities. He counted on that. This new high-priestess of a new kind of world would never convince him that her communism had any virtue at all—for the western world anyway. It might be all right here. In England? Never . . .

‘But it *is* like that,’ she insisted. ‘Most of the world lives in awful misery.’

He laughed at her. ‘Does it?’ he said. ‘Ah well, Nina, what the devil are we doing sitting up here arguing about the future of the world for when it’s clear that neither you nor I can settle it?’

‘But you despair too easily!’ she said impatiently.

‘I never despair!’ he told her. ‘And to prove it, I’m about to put my brains to work. Now,’ he said, standing up and taking off his shirt, because it was very hot (Nina was sheltering under her

white parasol). 'If I were a Greek architect building a temple on this small island, where would I put it?'

'On high ground,' she suggested. 'Up here somewhere.'

'Not necessarily. When the myth-makers made Achilles a god, he was already a sort of oracle for seamen and the sea, for navigators, for safe-passages. Even if this island isn't Leuce, the Greek seamen and even the Roman seamen must have called in here and come ashore to make their sacrifices to some sort of god, and then got off again as quickly as possible before dark. There must have been *something* on this island.'

'Let's look at the other side,' she suggested.

'No,' he told her. 'We must decide first exactly where to look and why. If there was a temple, or even a sacrificial altar on this island, it was probably somewhere to the east where it could catch the morning sun, which takes us back to where we came ashore. That was probably the best sea approach then, as it seems to be now.'

He wrapped his shirt around his hot head, and they walked down the bare, sandy slope. Gulls screeched overhead as they reached the cliff face.

They began to search the top of the cliff, looking for cut stones, or bricks or fragments of any kind. Rupert used his shovel where a small mound suggested something hidden. They inspected the cliff face itself, and then the shore. Nina, up to her knees in water with her shoes in one hand, holding up her skirts and her parasol in the other, called out to him:

'It's like looking for mushrooms. Russians love to go mushrooming in September. In the pine forests especially.'

Rupert looked along the beach and said, 'Why don't we both walk along the beach and look at the whole shore-line?'

They decided to get into their swimming-suits and cover as much of the shore as they could before noon.

But it soon became a picnic again, because their pleasures were too difficult to resist now. Did he really care if he found some artifact from the dead past? At times he did, and at times he didn't. It was a strange climax of indecision in him. Nina walked along the shore-line in the water looking for shells and dodging the seagulls which dived on them. Then she found a nest of pelicans, which pleased Rupert because the pelicans had always been

the guardians of the altars—the sacred birds in all temples to Achilles. His enthusiasm returned again.

It grew hot and they swam. They ate their picnic lunch in a small cleft of rock, lying in a little patch of shade. The ship's cook had given them red caviar, smoked salmon, boiled eggs, dried and smoked fish, salami, chicken, and a dozen tiny crab apples, thick black bread, Dutch cheese and two bottles of sweet muscat wine—undrinkably sweet, as well as two big aluminium bottles of water.

'No wonder it was so heavy,' Rupert said.

They lay back in the shade until Rupert began to feel guilty—wasting valuable time—so he pottered about in the sun looking among the soft rocks nearby.

'In the north,' Nina told him, walking near him under her parasol, 'the hunters say you will only see the particular game you are looking for if you have it in your mind's eye, and nothing else. What should I have in my mind's eye?' she asked him teasingly. 'There is no temple, so what are we looking for?'

'All right, all right!' he said defensively. 'I know you still don't believe in it. But I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll look for the fragments, and you look for the coins.'

'Coins?'

'Yes. There are always coins.'

'But they're so small.'

'Never mind that. Look for them anyway.'

'*Horoshaw!*' she said cheerfully and began, on her hands and knees, to go over the small part of the slope. Then she got up and laughed and ran off over the slope and disappeared, and Rupert went on cutting into mounds with his shovel, wondering now why he had come all this way on such a ridiculous and dream-like mission.

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It was hot and tiring, and when he eventually came over the hump he found Nina asleep under her parasol. 'So the machinery does stop sometimes,' he told himself. She opened her eyes and looked at him and smiled, and without moving, pointed to the horizon.

'There is lightning,' she said.

The far horizon of the afternoon sky had a black streak run-

ning along it, and a few faint flashes lit up the edges of the clouds.

‘Go back to sleep,’ he told her.

‘No. It feels like a storm coming. It’s very oppressive now.’

He felt it also. Something was in the air. The sea was leaden, the sky was pale and still, but the horizon was already fuming with some sort of menace. Nina went off to put their clothes and shoes and their rucksack back into the little hole in the cliff, in case it rained, and Rupert walked on down the far slope and looked over the edge and saw, surprisingly, the remnants of a hut, just above the shore.

It was instantly clear to him that this had been a gun emplacement in the last war, and when he went down to it he found that the hut was built of wooden crates, and it had a fairly solid tin roof. By the shape of the emplacement the gun had probably been an 80 mm. German anti-aircraft, and a few old German tin shell-cases were lying about.

‘Pity!’ he told himself. ‘You can’t escape the garbage of it, even here.’

There was even a fragment of barbed wire, which was always the ugliest relic of war.

He was about to plunge in for another swim to cool off again when he heard Nina calling him. She shouted: ‘Look! Look!’ as she appeared over the edge, holding something in her hand. ‘Look what I’ve found. How clever you are, Rupert!’

She reached him with her hand open, and in it was a very rough, dirty, lead or bronze coin caked with earth but quite clearly a genuine piece of ancient currency.

He said, ‘It’s Greek anyway.’ On one side was a bearded face, and on the other side was a chariot and a few letters in Greek. He knew the difference in size between a tetradrachma and a stater, and this looked like an Alexandrine stater. ‘Where did you find it?’

‘I just pulled at some grass,’ she said, as they hurried back excitedly, ‘and there it was among the roots.’

‘What luck,’ he said to her. ‘It may be something important.’

‘But you’re so clever,’ she said seriously. ‘I didn’t really believe in it.’ Nina was already so excited that when Rupert got down on his hands and knees and began to scoop up more earth from the

place where she had found it, she did the same, digging erratically with her fingers. But he stopped her. 'I'll pull out the earth, and you sift through it,' he told her.

'Yes, oh yes.'

She was now an enthusiast. They began to work the site carefully and whenever she found a round flat stone or pebble, she inspected it closely as if determination itself could turn it into another coin.

They were so absorbed that they lost the thread of the day, and they were very hot and perspiring in the now deadly air when a crack of nearby thunder crashed in on them like a giant beast which had found them scrabbling in the dirt at the foot of its cave.

'It's coming,' Nina said in alarm. 'Look!'

The black clouds had already occupied the best part of the north-eastern sky, and they were so black that their reflection hung over everything about them. It was black earth and a black sea and their faces were deeply shadowed in the black sunlight. The sea had also begun to move restlessly as if something were pressing hard on it from far off, and the lightning cracked open this black daylight with crisp, snarling sheets of highly electrified light.

'Zaritza!' Nina cried.

'What's that?'

'Sheet lightning,' she said nervously. 'We call it dawn lightning in the feminine, to make it sound more poetic. But even so, I don't like it.'

'We'd better shift our gear to that old hut,' he told her.

They began to run towards the cliff face, and the darkness of the cloud caught up with the sun, and the lightning and the thunder now smashed open whole organs of noise and theatres of light.

It did not rain immediately. The preliminaries simply advertised the coming acts of the drama. They ran across the little island, dropping their gear and stumbling and picking each other up and reaching the hut—hot, and soaked with the sort of sweat which was reluctant to emerge in this cotton-wool air. Rupert looked at the roof. It had half a dozen cracks in it.

'I forgot the shovel,' he said, and ran out to go back up the hill.

‘It doesn’t matter. Come back!’ Nina cried as the lightning bounced like a golden knife-blade along the crest of the island.

Rupert waved his hand and ran up the slope feeling elated at this final release of orchestral nature. He realized, at the same time, that he was not in very good condition for running. He was too breathless too quickly. He found the shovel, and he stood for a moment watching the first tall sheet of wind cutting up the water like a chopper. It hit the island a swiping gust, then it stopped.

‘Beautiful! Come on, come on!’ he said aloud, as this Greek drama developed all around him. He felt the first raindrop hitting his bare shoulder like a hot lead pellet.

‘Rupert!’ Nina was out of the hut, calling to him.

He abandoned his view of it and ran down the slope as the black sky opened up a cloud of rain and poured it down on them. He caught Nina gaily by the hand then galloped down the slope as the sky opened up again and released what felt like a waterfall of lukewarm liquid.

Rupert was caught in it, as he stood outside the hut looking at the roof. He used the shovel to straighten the bent tin sheets, and he found rocks to put on the worst cracks. He was reassuring Nina, with his hair slaked wet over his face. She was worried about the lightning which was now bombarding the island. The sea was already pounding the edges of the cliffs with rolling crests of dirty water and brown foam, and by now he could hardly see the water through the streams of thick black rain.

‘Rupert. Please!’ Nina cried insistently as a jocular spear of lightning hit the ground near him. He felt its heat running up his back.

‘Don’t worry,’ he shouted as he slid down. The earth was already mud, and the rain on the upturned shovel sounded like a mad ringing bell. ‘I’m coming . . .’

He leapt inside the hut and stood panting and dripping beside her, as more lightning dug into the earth all around them. After each flash the explosion of its thunder shook the whole island and rattled the hut in deep waves of vibrating sound.

‘No wonder the Greeks believed in Jove and Hephaestus,’ he shouted happily. ‘It’s a game of giants. They’re hurling it all down on us.’

'I hate it!' she cried, holding a towel around her shoulders. 'I'm afraid of it.'

He lifted the hair on her flushed neck, lifting her head up because she looked ashamed of herself, and he could not help laughing at her.

'It can't hurt you.'

'What if it strikes this hut?'

'It might. But it might strike anything, anywhere.'

'*Ya baious!*' she said in Russian. She was afraid, and she gave him another towel to dry himself with.

The first gust of wind he had felt on the hill had only been a small try-out. Now the real wind arrived, swooping down on the little hut like a giant hand trying alternatively to flatten it and then lift it up. Some jovial god was having a good time, but the hut survived. The cracks allowed streams of hot air through, the rain leaked down the sides, but the floor was dry, and there were only a few drips. Nina wanted to close the door, but Rupert kept it open so that they could watch this Olympian game across the dirty and tempestuous sea.

Nina pulled her blouse on over her head to hide her eyes and said, 'The ship will not come back for us in this weather. I hate that lightning.'

'How long do these storms usually last?'

'Not long,' she said, shivering and muffled in her blouse. 'A day. Perhaps two.'

'Anyway, we've got enough food to feed an army,' he told her.

She nodded, as if she could no longer trust her voice. He was surprised to see that she was so afraid, but when he gently pulled her head out of her blouse her wide eyes were unable to disguise it. He had moments of fear himself, but they passed quickly and hardly interfered with his fascination in this unusual storm.

'Let's eat,' he said to her. That should take her mind off the worst of it. He did not wait to hear what she said, but pulled his shirt on, undid the rucksack and took out a bottle of the muscat wine.

'Let's have some of this stuff,' he suggested. 'It's probably a good wine for thunderstorms because there's no other time when you can drink muscat. It's too sweet.'

Nina did not drink alcohol, but she nodded.

'That's something our cook forgot,' he said, hunting in the rucksack. 'A corkscrew.'

She took the bottle from him and found a knife in the sack. She pushed the tip of the blade into the cork, then pressed it deeper and gradually worked the cork up with a back and forth twist on the knife.

'I'll be damned,' he said. He had forgotten the storm, watching her alert fingers at work. 'I've never seen that done before.'

Nina still wasn't talking. She still did not trust herself, and she set out the food silently and peeled hard-boiled eggs and jumped nervously with each flash of lightning. She took a very small drink of sticky muscat before she spoke.

'It's only the lightning I don't like.' Her voice was full of apology and shame. 'It's so like something supernatural. It would kill you without reason. I hate that.'

'What's the difference?' he said. 'Anything that kills you violently does so without reason. Why is lightning any more frightening than a runaway bus?'

'I suppose so,' she said, revived a little by the pickled cucumber or the sweet wine. 'But I'd hate to die by a lightning stroke.'

'How would you like to die then?' he teased.

'Of old age,' she said seriously. 'Or if I have to die suddenly it ought to be for something worth while. You should only die violently defending something which you believe in more than life itself.'

He knew what that meant to Nina. But was this woman, who was so frightened of lightning, capable of dying romantically on such an ideal prospect? He knew she would face fire, terror and torture to defend her communist world, the one she put above her own life and her own desires. He laughed at the thought of it. Death by lightning would be too easy for Nina.

'You remind me of the early Christians,' he told her, eating his salami with appetite. A new thunderslap shook the hut so that it almost collapsed.

'How can you say that?' she replied apprehensively. 'I don't believe in any God. Do you believe in God?'

'Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't,' he said. 'I probably believe in all the natural gods, the pagan ones. On the whole they were more humane and compelling and sympathetic than our own.'

But he looked ironically at Nina—crouched low over her own fears and still terrified by this insane and wasteful yet deadly arbiter—the bolt from the blue. Yet he wished, at the same time, that he had some of her genuine courage: her simple belief in a coherent world, her real strength of will, her unshakable conviction in her own resources, and her naïve trust in the vast comradeship of the world she lived in. It exposed something of Nina he had never seen in a woman before, or in a man for that matter, and he realized how close he had been to the truth of Nina when he had jokingly compared her with the early Christians.

But it was only when true darkness fell, and when the storm had settled down to a giant sea and a regular beat of thunder and an occasional and unpredictable shaft of lightning, that Nina began to feel safe.

Their hut was very dry and dark, although the lightning still lit up everything in its yellow, growling drama. But they were safe. The hut had been well built, the Germans had obviously wanted it to last long after they themselves were dead on some lonely battlefield. But it was snug, and they had now dressed themselves and they sat down and leaned on their elbows and talked casually about themselves. He discovered that Nina had never spoken to an Englishman before meeting him. Where had she learned such good English?

Nina told him that she had learned it at the Moscow Institute for Foreign Languages. How had she become a 'Cultural worker' in the far north? She said she had originally been a teacher of English—a cadre who had gone to the far north to help there. She had then met and married Vodopyanov, and started lecturing in the farthest outposts, and they had liked her lectures on Russian and English poets so much that the Ministry of the Far North had asked her to stay and do it all the time. She asked him about Jo, and when he told her what Jo did, she said to him: 'She is wasted, Rupert. She is a woman. She would want to do more with her life than you realize, don't you think? Do you think she is afraid of suggesting or doing something else, because women are made to feel disloyal to their home and husbands if they act independently? That must be very true in your world.'

He resented her saying that, but he realized that it was probably true, and he wondered how she had felt this, since her own world

seemed so different. She went on asking him how they had met, and were they both rich, and what was it like to be rich in a capitalist world where there were so many poor. He did not disillusion her, but he was surprised when she admitted: 'You can also be a rich man in our country. You can own a house, but you can't have money that makes you more money.'

It was pleasant and very secure to lie here in the dark and talk in this Russian fashion about their lives. Occasionally he went out to look at the black sky and taste the rain, but each time he came back and settled down again he knew that he was trying to avoid what already seemed to be inevitable.

Rupert would try to persuade himself ^{it} ~~it~~ on that perhaps it was simply their isolation that brought it ~~out~~. Perhaps it was the exotic nature of their surroundings, or the recklessness which the noise and anarchy of the weather induced in the senses. Whatever it was, it had to be very powerful to break down their mutual moral policies and press them towards each other.

At first it was no more than a light and friendly touch. She had her hand firmly on his arm as if she loved this gentle but quite innocent contact. It was pleasant and friendly. But contact is hard to control, and slowly and without them being particularly aware of it, the touch multiplied too many other responses through fibres that were blood and flesh, rather than the mere ~~untouchable~~ air of their ~~temperaments~~.

'You have been very English today,' she said affectionately to him. 'I love the English when they are like that.'

'How do you know what is English, and what isn't?' he asked her.

'Oh, I know. I know! You are best when you are modest and polite and thoughtful and gentle.'

He knew this was risky talk under the circumstances, and they both tried to stop it. But it was impossible to stop the warmth of it altogether; and slowly what mattered most to them was the flow that went through their touch. That was what they now thought about. They could think of nothing else, and they were silent and preoccupied with it, no matter how gentle and innocent it seemed to be.

He put his other hand out and found her face, and then he pushed his fingers very carefully through her salty hair.

'Boje moi! Boje moi!' she murmured almost uncontrollably—resisting him and yet pushing her face into his hand as if she could not help herself.

He said nothing. He was already afraid of what was happening. They were on the verge of embracing, yet they were still disciplining themselves against it, which made the longing even more agonizing and difficult. When he finally gripped her shoulder, he felt her resisting again and she whispered: 'Nyet, nyet!' and he longed to resist also.

He could not. And suddenly she also gave way, which meant that his own will was undermined by her sudden warm panic.

'I must stop this!' he wanted to cry out.

He could not stop now, and though he could feel and sense the same kind of moral resistance in this moral Nina, in this cautious and duteous and admiring Nina whom he had grown to admire and respect so much, he knew it was too late. They were too deeply involved with each other now to stop anything. He knew he would have had to stop the world itself . . .

As she talked to him and flooded him with incomprehensible Russian, he could not find a coherent thought. But even as he found the secret woman that he knew was waiting for him in the body of Nina Vodopyanov, he was full of regret for his betrayal of his own Jo, even at the very instant that he was gladly cutting down layers and layers of an old life he felt he had never lived or known before now.

'No! Oh, no!' Nina was crying, breaking up her own tears at the same moment that her whole body was beating at him as if it wanted to burst out and plunge like a wave into his.

'Ah, Nina!' he said gently and slowly and regretfully, and passionately also. 'I have hurt you terribly.'

'No, no, no! Don't say that,' she cried as if he had tried to take it all away from her.

'But it's terribly wrong,' he said sadly.

'I know. I know it is. It should never have happened. How can I forgive myself now? It's my fault. It is all my fault.'

'Shhhh! You mustn't say that.'

'I should have stopped it . . .'

But he took the blame because he knew the initiative had been his, and she pressed her tears into his cheek with the firm pressure of terrible regret. Their regret was already uppermost. It hurt them both.

'You're a good man,' she said, in tears and holding him so tight with her arms for a moment that he felt as if she were trying to hold off the rest of the world and to defy the consequences anyway, to drag him down quickly into the Russian earth from which there could be no escape.

But she let him go, and he suddenly felt the loss, the sadness, the desire, and above all, the unhappy guilt. She had let him go . . .

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But in the light of day, Rupert wondered how two such scrupulous people could have lapsed so badly.

There had been no real warning of it, no likelihood of desire creeping up on them, no touch or furtive overtures which could have made it inevitable. He knew that it had to be something extraordinary—something as exotic and broken-edged as that Greek storm—which could force them into such a serious error. But he also knew, as they ate their breakfast and dug listlessly in the mud for coins he had lost interest in, that it was more complex than that.

'It will never happen again,' she told him unhappily. 'I have hurt you and your family. I shall never forgive myself.'

'Don't say that,' he told her again.

Did she say that for her own family as well? Did she care that much about Alexei? He knew she did. He had seen it and felt it. How could he doubt it? When they were standing up on the hill looking down at the froth of brown foam and seaweed bubbling on the edge of the water, he could see tears running silently down her face. She said nothing, but he knew who the tears were for.

She too had betrayed a vital part of herself.

'Never mind,' he said tenderly but so inadequately that it hurt him.

'I must mind! I can't help it. I'm sorry, Rupert.'

If she had shown any other sort of emotion, if she had tried to smooth it over lightly, or call it a moment's aberration which could be forgotten and forgiven, or had she allowed the passion

itself to rule her, he knew he could have hated her and then lived somehow for the rest of his life with the experience as a terrible personal crime, worth nothing in itself. But this sort of shame was punishing both of them, and because of it he was already beginning to feel a deep affection for her which had not been there before.

It would even occur to him later on that his real feelings for Nina Vodopyanov only began in this mutual understanding that it was profoundly wrong and must never happen again.

Chapter Thirty-four

Alexei was waiting for them at the sanatorium with a big patch of plaster on the back of his head, two broken fingers wrapped in thick bandages, and a male nurse called Grisha who kept telling him to sit down—‘Alexei Alexeivitch . . .’

He met them in the lobby at the entrance hall standing up and shouting at the top of his voice: ‘Nina! Rupert! Here I am!’ as if they had been waiting for him to appear.

Rupert blushed, even his heart seemed to turn hot, and Nina became embarrassed with her own husband, chiding him immediately. She was the mother of no children, but this was the voice and manner of a mother with a rebellious and impossible child.

‘*Nu!*’ she said helplessly in Russian. ‘What have you done now?’

‘Nothing,’ Alexei said innocently. ‘They let me come.’

‘Is that true?’ she asked Grisha who was a sad-looking Abkhazi who seemed resigned to everything, even to Alexei’s egotistical energy.

‘It’s true,’ he sighed. ‘They told me to stay with him and see that he doesn’t walk too much. That’s all.’

‘Alexei!’ Nina said in her primmest, high-pitched Russian. ‘You are completely irresponsible. Look at what you are doing. You have no sense of responsibility. You do a terrible thing like this.’

‘Like what?’ he cried indignantly.

‘You occupy one man all the time to yourself. You make a lot of trouble for everybody. You are irresponsible.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ he said happily to his wife. ‘They were glad to get rid of me. I don’t want Grisha with me. They insisted! Grisha,’ he said to the Abkhazi. ‘Go home. Go away, Grisha.’

Grisha shrugged. ‘Not possible, Alexei Alexeivitch,’ he said sadly. ‘You know that I can’t leave you.’

'Sec!' Alexei told them persuasively. 'And I was lonely.'

'Sit down,' Grisha told him. 'Please, Alexei Alexeivitch.'

Alexei remained standing, smiling happily at everybody in the lobby who had witnessed this scene. Strangers began to make their own comments, and someone told Alexei he really ought to sit down, for his own good. But Nina said firmly to him: 'You come with me!' and, picking up her suitcase, she said to Rupert: 'Let us go to your place. He can't get up the stairs to mine.'

'Of course I can. That's where I'm living.'

Rupert had watched this small dissembling quarrel closely, and he watched Alexei now to see if it was jealousy or suspicion which had brought him back. He felt afraid and guilty; he was sure he could detect suspicion in Alexei's attitude to Nina. Yet it was impossible. There was no suspicion or jealousy in Alexei's life. He believed too much in himself, he was too happy with his wife and his friends, and with his wonderful English comrade Rupairt Royiss.

It was Rupert himself who felt a moment's jealousy, and it amazed him.

As they walked along the wide dark corridors, Alexei gripped Rupert's arm awkwardly with his broken bandaged hand. The Russian didn't mind taking help from his English comrade. Alexei's other arm was trying to carry Nina's small suitcase, as a gesture of conciliation and bravado, but she refused to allow it and said '*Nyet!*' irritably. Nina obviously did not know yet how to behave, what to say, what to do.

So Rupert was locked to Alexei in the usual iron grip. He felt like a prisoner manacled to his jailer, and he was thinking with every step they took that he must try to leave Russia tomorrow, or the next day at the very latest.

He asked Nina later on to put in telephone calls to Jo in London and to Rolland, because he said he must now leave the Soviet Union as quickly as possible. He had done what he had come here to do.

'Yes,' she said faintly. 'That's a good idea. You must go.'

There was no longer any persuasion to stay, or any call on his affection and friendship. Nina's original sense of duty had

collapsed, and so had her will. In the ship, returning, he had watched her succumbing to seasickness, and he knew that he had undermined her world of absolute hope to such an extent that even her stomach had beaten her.

'Even so,' he warned himself unhappily, 'I must try not to feel so broken by it. It's over! It was a terrible mistake, and surely it's done with!' He had tried often to convince himself, but he could not be so fashionable. His morals were like hers. Nothing could make it right.

'Here is Rolland!' Nina shouted to him from the telephone.

He went to the phone, realizing grimly that he and Nina were alone again. Alexei had been sent to a spare room to sleep and to rest, but as Nina gave him the telephone and as he heard Rolland's small English voice calling him, he felt rescued by a childish reality.

'Is that you, Father?'

The 'father' was very formal. Rolland must be in one of his stiff and grown-up moods. 'Yes, it's me,' Rupert said loudly. 'How are you?'

'Very well, thank you. Is anything the matter?'

'No, no. I rang to ask you if you are ready to go home,' Rupert shouted.

Rolland did not answer for a moment. 'Back to England, you mean?'

'Yes, of course.'

'All right,' Rolland said with his most polite and secret voice. 'If you say so.'

Rupert was already irritated with Rolland's reply. Why did he have to push his father away now? Rupert had expected a warmer and more intimate and more excited son, not this polite and secretive Rolland. He could hear the reserve in his voice.

'What's the matter?' Rupert said. 'Aren't you sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure. But when?'

'As soon as we can get a plane,' Rupert told him. 'In a day or two.'

'I thought Mother said we shouldn't fly,' Rolland warned him.

'Never mind that. We have to fly.'

'Can I wait here until Thursday?'

'I don't know, it depends on the plane. Thursday means waiting four more days. Why? What happens on Thursday?'

'I'm in two plays,' Rolland said. 'It's an English play by Shakespeare called *The Tempest*, and *The Wizard of Oz*.'

'In Russian?'

'Half in Russian, half in English. I would spoil it if I left now. Can I stay, please?'

Rupert wondered how he would survive four more days' exposure, four more days before escaping. It was a high price to pay for saving a children's play. 'All right,' he said. 'Are you well? Are you all right?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'I'll come for you on Friday then,' Rupert said and hung up, after they had said goodbye rather stiffly and politely. Nina looked inquiringly at him to ask him how Rolland was.

'He seems to be quite happy,' Rupert said. 'He wants to stay until Thursday, so you'd better arrange for us to fly back to Moscow on Friday. Can you?'

'I think so.'

They were also very careful and polite with each other, although it was clear that something else was happening to them: the more they kept to their discipline and the harder they exercised their restraint, the more they seemed to be encouraging the very affection which hadn't been there before. It was beginning to suggest and encourage the very intimacy they were trying so hard to avoid.

'Can you get Jo on the phone for me?' he asked her.

'You'll have to wait until eleven o'clock tonight,' she told him. 'I will not come back until then. And now I must go and try to keep Alexei still, if you don't need me.'

'No. I don't need you.'

'Then I'll go.'

'All right . . .'

Nina left him reluctantly, and he knew he did not want her to go. He realized that he had lived almost every minute of the day with Nina for weeks, and now she was closing the door and going away to someone else, and he asked himself, 'What does she do when she goes back to Alexei? What happens between them? Can she be normal with him? Can she show him affection or love, or even touch him?' He hated his own questions, he cursed his mind and realized that the best part of her marriage to Alexei was hidden

in long intimacies which would never show, just as surely as the best part of his life with Jo was invisible and untouched by anyone but themselves.

‘Nina!’ he called to her.

She came back cautiously. ‘Yes?’

‘Where is Teddy?’ he asked, changing his mind. ‘Did he come back from Sevastopol?’

‘He came back, and went away again when they told him where we were. I don’t know where he is now. I think he’s with a friend. He brought someone with him from Sevastopol. Why? What did you want him for?’

‘Nothing at all. I simply wondered where he was.’

‘He’ll be back. Don’t worry about him,’ she said, and left quickly as Tatyana brought him lunch. Rupert felt now that it was almost a relief to worry about Teddy and his blue guide book. Anything to remove his mind from Nina.

It was almost three o’clock, and Rupert did not feel like eating but he sat down to the meal to justify Tanya’s hard work in getting it here hot and fresh for him. He must find out some day why it was such hard work.

‘Fish,’ she said. ‘I made very sure it was fresh after what happened to Kostya. And now we have a *pleetka* to keep the coffee hot. Why didn’t Nina and Alexei Alexeivitch eat here with you today?’

‘I don’t know, Tanya. I forgot to ask them.’

‘I asked Nina, and she said *No*. Have you quarrelled?’

‘No, no. I expect Alexei is to rest,’ he said and wondered if Tatyana, with her sentimental eye, would detect the new and drastic flaw which had suddenly appeared in his diamond-clear relationship with Nina.

*

Alexei staggered along the corridor at five o’clock to take Rupert for a swim. Nina had gone to Yalta, so he had Grisha and a friend with him. Rupert guessed that Alexei probably had a dozen friends in the place already. He said he would go, and despite the unpleasant awareness of his own hypocrisy, he quickly forgot his deception of Alexei and enjoyed his bounding company.

To get down to the beach Alexei had to stagger, fall, slide and eventually allow himself to be carried down some narrow concrete steps. It was a painful but happy sport. Four more friends

came to help. They went to the sanatorium's private beach, where, despite regulations, the beds on the wooden verandah were occupied by sleeping, naked Russians.

Alexei woke them all up with his arrival. He got his trousers off and stood up in his dark blue undershorts.

'That's too slippery,' he said looking at the wooden ramp which led out into the sea. 'I can't do it.'

Rupert looked at Alexei's legs, which he saw bare for the first time since the ice, and he realized what hell it must be for Alexei to walk on them. They were white, puny, nerveless, breakable and very inadequate for the weight of his thick body. They looked sore and dead because the rest of him was so muscular and alive.

'We'll carry you,' he told Alexei, and with Grisha and two other friends and twenty onlookers offering advice, they carried Alexei to the end of the pier.

'Now throw me in,' Alexei shouted.

'Can you swim?' Rupert asked.

'I think so,' Alexei answered. 'I used to swim in the pond with the geese when I was a boy. Throw me in.'

'What about your legs?'

'*Nichevo*,' he said. 'I don't need them.'

'Okay,' Rupert agreed, feeling a little of their older and harder world of the ice. With Grisha he counted in Russian. '*Raz! Dva! Tri!*' and threw Alexei into the sea, and everybody cheered.

He sank a long way, and then came up splashing about like a spaniel, his thick hair over his face. 'I'm off for a swim,' he shouted.

'What's this! What's this!'

One of the sanatorium's lifeguards had arrived, and when he saw who was in the water and who had thrown him in, the guard had to assert his legal authority and his responsibility.

'Get out of the water,' he shouted rudely at Alexei. 'What are you doing in there, with no legs?'

'That's all right, Tovarish,' Alexei told him, striking out. 'I can swim.'

'No, it isn't all right. If you get drowned I'll be blamed. Get out of the water, I say.'

'But I can swim. Look at me.'

'If you don't get out I'll come and pull you out with a boat-hook,' the guard shouted angrily. 'I don't want you drowning in my water. Come out!'

Rupert expected Alexei to laugh and swim on, and he was about to dive in and swim near him to see that he was all right, but to his astonishment, Alexei gave in.

'All right, all right!' Alexei shouted at the guard. 'But I'll knock your head off when I get out.'

'You do that,' the guard said derisively.

'You come down to that step and help me out and I'll flatten you.'

Everybody was laughing. Alexei was angry but quite obedient, as if the guard had to be obeyed as the king in his own domain. Rupert and Grisha went down the steps and helped him up, and Alexei staggered towards the guard saying. 'Well! Look out. I'm going to knock you about a bit.'

Now Rupert laughed: but everyone else took it seriously. Someone admonished Alexei for his reckless behaviour. One naked old man with a white spade beard said to him officiously, 'Is this the way our heroes behave? You are setting a bad example, Tovarish.'

'But these lifeguards behave like prison guards,' someone else said. 'We're supposed to be on holiday. Leave Vodopyanov alone, you crank!'

They were holding Alexei, and the guard was walking away with his tail up, which infuriated Alexei who stumbled after him, threatening to knock his head off. The naked old man with the beard walked behind Alexei and went on reprimanding him in strong language.

'You are uncultured, comrade. You are not behaving like a hero. You are shaming us in front of our foreign guest.'

'What do you know about heroes?' Alexei suddenly snarled, turning on him.

But Alexei was obviously hurt by the suggestion that he was 'uncultured', and he leaned heavily on Rupert and Grisha and staggered along the slippery ramp. He put his trousers on over his wet trunks and announced that he was leaving this insulting beach, and with groans of anger and threats from Grisha that he would be immediately dispatched back to Gagra if he insisted on

being so reckless, Alexei walked up the long steps, up the slope, up the paths to the sanatorium where he finally admitted defeat. He fell exhausted onto a white couch and put up his legs painfully and said to Rupert:

‘What do they know about heroes, Rupert? Do they know anything at all?’

‘Not a thing,’ Rupert said gently, and he wondered how this Russian would ever give in to death when death approached him with some sort of final demand. It seemed impossible. Rupert felt as if only now could he appreciate the determination and ferocity of Alexei’s will to survive those harsh months of pain and cold and defeat in the Arctic.

It was true what he had said to that old man: what did he know of heroes?

*

At midnight, when Nina had been waiting with him on the balcony in the silence and warmth and security of a summer’s blue night for almost an hour, Jo’s voice reached him with its golden haste, its English summer insistence.

‘Hello, Jo,’ he cried over the sleeping walls of midnight. ‘How are you?’

Her voice disappeared and he felt as if Jo herself were wavering back and forth, and he shouted urgently to bring her back.

‘When are you coming home?’ she was saying. ‘You sound just like a Russian. Did you go to the island? I’ve just got your letter . . .’

‘Yes,’ he said, cursing the memory of that island. ‘We got there. Listen. We may be home in about a week . . .’

‘I expected you home today or tomorrow. Is Rolland there?’

She faded away again and he shouted: ‘No, he’s asleep.’ He had not told her about Rolland going to the camp. That could wait. So much could wait. The line faded out again. There was nothing at all, and Jo had gone. Then she came back in the middle of a restless sentence about Tess, who had been two days in hospital.

‘Why is she in hospital?’ he shouted. ‘I thought she was better.’

The line parted, and he handed the phone to Nina who argued in screeches with the operator and then she hung up.

‘They will try to connect you again,’ she said.
‘Jo was just telling me that Tess was in hospital.’
‘Let’s wait,’ she said.

They returned to the blue balcony overlooking the black sea which was frosted with tiny waves of white moonlight until the frontier guards suddenly switched on their searchlight and cut it all up like a cake.

‘You needn’t wait, Nina,’ he told her.
‘It won’t be long.’

She was recovering her sense of duty, her dispassionate care of him. But he was in danger again, because even the little acts of discipline had become a reminder of what they were disciplining themselves against. It was getting worse not better, and though he had hoped that Jo’s voice would rescue him and set everything straight again, it was not going to be so easy. Jo was Jo. Her voice was normal and distant and impersonal, as she always seemed to be. One intimate or secret word from Jo and he would have felt propped-up, but she did not have intimate and secret words. Everything with Jo was wonderfully above-board; even love, affection and marriage. Her honesty was so total that he now felt like a thief.

‘Won’t Alexei worry,’ he said to Nina, ‘if he wakes up?’

‘No,’ she said calmly. ‘He knows where I am, and I left Grisha there until I came back. He is sound asleep.’

‘While you sit here with me,’ he felt like saying cynically. But cynicism hardly suited his mood or his temperament. He knew that she was also suffering the same curses of doubt, the same blows at her body and mind. It must be even worse for her, because the other part of her life was only a few steps away, upstairs, and she had to walk from one to the other and keep calm and sane and fight off the running blows at her will and her conscience.

‘I’m very sorry, Nina,’ he said hesitantly, hopelessly.

She knew what he meant. ‘It’s my own problem now,’ she said quietly.

So it was, and he also knew what his own problem was. Jo’s voice had told him a great deal. It was not really news to him that he and Jo were different in temperament, as well as in their hidden and untouchable sources of affection. But it was becoming

clear to him now that he and Nina were not so different. They were, in fact, very much alike; and whatever was the moral weakness they were both resisting, it was also a curious moral identity which Rupert knew he had never felt in anyone else before.

'You mustn't think or worry so much,' she said gently to him. 'I'm all right.'

Women could be amazingly calm and tough, he decided. She seemed calm, but he wasn't so sure; and he was saved the embarrassment of other unanswerable questions by the telephone. Once more he heard Jo's normal voice, and once more he tried to extract a secret link from her far-away words. But it was not possible.

'They gave Tess a very unpleasant enema,' she shouted to him. 'That's all it was. They were taking tests, and they say she's all right.'

'That's wonderful,' he cried. 'I'll be there as soon as I can.'

'Yes, but don't you dare fly,' Jo told him.

'Why not?'

'Please don't! Don't fly with Rolland. It only takes two days by train from Moscow, so please don't fly with him.'

'All right,' he shouted, and this time he felt better. You protect your children above your life, yourself, and above the whole world. That was an intimacy that did not need any help. Children were still the real prize of love, no matter what else was lacking, no matter what other remarkable affinities you suddenly discovered elsewhere--rather late in life.

Even so, every minute seemed to count now.

He thought that it could hardly be worse, but when Nina was reading out the news to him from *Pravda* in the morning in the garden, where Alexei was trying to catch a white butterfly with his straw hat, he was startled by a short item which Nina read casually among the others.

'A so-called English student,' she read, 'was arrested in Moscow last Friday, where he had been acting as agent for a foreign power engaged in espionage and gathering economic and military information. He has confessed to his nefarious activities, and other agents have also been uncovered . . .'

‘What’s his name?’ Rupert asked.

‘It doesn’t say,’ she told him, and went on reading about the Congo, where America was trying to split off Katanga from the Congo proper, *Pravda* said, and about the results of a five-and-a-half-ton satellite which the Russians had landed safely from orbit two weeks before, with animals on board.

‘Isn’t Teddy back yet?’ he asked her.

She looked up. ‘I think he is now in Moscow,’ she said. ‘Why do you worry so much about him? You will see him.’

‘I miss him,’ Rupert told her.

But he knew that Teddy’s return was sure to be his doom. That was no exaggeration. He felt sure of it. But there was little he could do about it now because the earliest reservation Nina could find on a plane to Moscow was on Friday. With a little luck he might arrive in Moscow Friday night and catch the Sunday train to London.

But Teddy was sure to turn up before then, or perhaps to catch him in Moscow on the way.

It was becoming very difficult now to live calmly with this mental disorder. Perhaps it also made physical disorder inevitable, and he woke up next morning weak and hot. He had a high fever and his body seemed broken and unbearable. ‘Flu?’ he decided. He tried to hide it from Tatyana and Nina, who arrived as usual with his breakfast. But it was too apparent, and he was too ill to sit up for long.

‘You are feverish,’ Tatyana said.

‘You look very sick,’ Nina agreed.

He nodded helplessly. Wasn’t it pleasant to have two young women so worried about you? He was too tired to care, and they told him bossily to get back into bed where he gladly folded himself under the hot sheets and allowed his body to shipwreck itself on the feeling of moral defeat and moral exhaustion.

Chapter Thirty-five

His illness was complicated by Nina and the doctors.

Nina guarded his room against all comers, particularly Alexei. No one but Tanya could come and go. He was being isolated just when he was getting used to people knocking on his door and asking to see him, to say that they were happy to meet him. One day he had opened the door and a woman with a bunch of flowers had said: 'I am not very well today, but I thought you would like these flowers for your table. I'm sorry I'm not well.' She had said it hurriedly and then had gone away. Why should he worry that she had not been well? Why should he care? He had never seen her in his life before. But Russians dragged you innocently and wholly into their lives, and he was beginning to like these visits. Now Nina declared them over.

Sanatorium doctors appeared, one after the other, until nine had seen him. He was sure that they were making him worse than he really was, although he felt exhausted and wretched. Nurses took his pulse and blood samples, and doctors took his blood pressure and tested his breathing, his limbs, his heart.

'No more doctors,' he appealed to Nina on the second day of it.

'But they have to find out what's wrong with you,' she said.

'I know what's wrong with me.'

She shook her head at him. She was very worried. She was so worried that she seemed reluctant to leave him at all, and even when he fell asleep during the day he knew that she was sitting outside in the other room, reading or writing and waiting for him to call her in and tell her to go away and leave him.

'The doctors don't know what's wrong with you yet,' she told him now, 'so how can *you* know? They have to take Roentgen rays of your chest.'

'I've got flu,' he said in the pleasant abandon of exhaustion and sickness. How could he care what happened now? He would

be all right. Nina would see that nothing happened to him. He felt safe simply because this auburn woman was there; although at night when he was alone he began to feel physically unsafe, because he could hardly breathe, even though there was very little fever or sign of flu.

He knew then that he had something more serious than flu.

In the morning, a dark-eyed Armenian woman doctor asked him if he could get downstairs to the Roentgen-ray room.

‘Certainly,’ he said, although he doubted it.

He put on his khaki dressing-gown and slopped downstairs without Nina’s help. She had mysteriously disappeared, and he was left with the Armenian woman doctor, who spoke French, and an old man in a rubber apron in the dark X-ray room. When they had finished with him he pulled himself up the stairs from the basement, and went back to sleep, waking up when Tatyana brought him chicken, and he said sentimentally to her:

‘Men are weaklings, Tanya. It’s only women who are strong. Not so?’

‘That’s because we weep easily,’ Tatyana said busily. He laughed. The voice of perpetual victory—the Russian voice. Where did they get it from?

Nina came back with a tenth doctor, also a woman, who looked like a dowdy English housewife living in the country: she was thin and tired and probably clever. She had the X-ray plates, and Nina introduced her as a specialist from Yalta, Dr. Dolidze.

‘You’re a Georgian,’ he said, to her.

She understood and nodded, and through Nina she began to question him about tuberculosis. Had he ever had it?

‘Certainly not,’ he said.

‘Have you been X-rayed often?’ Nina asked for her.

‘In the Navy, and when I came back from the ice.’

‘There was no sign of anything?’

‘Not a thing. Why?’

‘Is there any history of it in your family?’ she asked.

He admitted that his father had died of it in 1935 in Penang, and though it was obvious who the specialist was and where all this talk was leading, he didn’t believe it. His body wasn’t going to turn traitor on him now—not to that extent.

‘She wants to know about your days on the ice with Alexei,’

Nina said, and her feminine spirit was obviously recovered with every word, and with every call on her sense of protection for him. It was easy to see where her strength came from, but this too was going to take them deeper into each other, because he needed Nina now. This was a monster they were facing him with, and he would need her moral support against it.

‘It’s impossible, Nina,’ he said. ‘I haven’t got tuberculosis.’

Nina looked at him unhappily and said nothing.

‘What does Dr. Dolidze say?’ he asked her. The doctor had been looking at his abdomen and his legs, and listening to his lungs and heart. She had inspected the X-rays again, and she read a file of blood analyses and blood reports.

‘She says that you have either had it recently, or you have got it now, Rupert. It would be wrong to lie to you. You have all the symptoms now of tuberculosis, and because of your experience on the ice, and because your father died of it, she feels sure that you have it now.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ he insisted.

‘But it’s curable!’ Nina told him quickly. ‘It’s not so bad now. We have drugs. Everybody has drugs against it, even the English. It takes time; but it’s not such a bad disease any more. Don’t worry, please don’t worry.’

‘I’m not worried, because I don’t believe it,’ he said and he knew what six months or a year of tuberculosis could do to him now. He knew how revolting the disease was for others, and what it could do to what was left of his broken morale.

‘She’ll have to prove it,’ he repeated stubbornly, ‘before I believe it.’

‘I don’t want to believe it either,’ Nina said gently, but as she talked to the doctor, and as her firm Russian face set more and more into expressions of determination and resistance and toughness, he knew that Nina believed the expert, and was now intent on rescuing him somehow. She was already taking on the responsibility for him and for his illness and for his safety, so that he lay back feeling that he would never be able to escape her now.

Lying helpless in bed, he had too much time to think and to worry, and not enough mind to defend himself with. He had tried

to push Coleman out of this thoughts, and he had already lost interest in J. B. Lille's more dispassionate spying. What was the use of plotting fanciful diagrams of Soviet sentiment and looking myopically for atomic beach-heads, when he was now trapped by a model of the sentiment itself, and caught on another sort of beach-head? He was about to be strangled on it by barbed wire, choked to death by long rusty strands of what was still called Military Intelligence.

They were bitter thoughts, because he worried about Teddy. Where was he? He blamed others for his predicament: Phillips-Jones at the Meteorological Office and Paul Poole and even his shy narcotic friend, J. B. Lille. It was their fault that he was trapped, and it was even a dirty trick of nature that he was so ill.

But this sort of thinking got him nothing, and he decided not to think at all. Anyway, he knew that he still had a chance, because he had two safeguards. He couldn't believe that his body had given in to such a rotten illness; and he knew that if the worst came to the worst and he was accused of espionage, Nina would put up a fight for him. She had to. That was also part of this secret and unspoken moral compact. She would never allow Teddy to snatch him away so easily, whether he was guilty or not.

But he wondered what her duty would tell her to do this time, and for that matter what his own sense of duty would do for him. They were very evenly matched. But Nina would surely realize that there was more to him than that nonsensical fragment of invisible writing on a blue guide book.

She had gone to get Rolland for him. If his temperature did not go up any higher the ten doctors said he could travel on his back as far as Moscow at least. There other specialists would see him. He waited impatiently for Nina to come back, playing chess with Alexei who played it like a dragoon and swept up Rupert's cautious openings with a gusto that made Rupert wince. He knew by now that in any contest for the world, Alexei's energy would outlast his own. That was also part of Russia. J. B. Lille ought to know about that, because if it ever came to a war the Russians would outlast and outlive everybody else, he was convinced of it, because they were so much hardier and so sure of themselves, and so resilient to all extraordinary circumstances—psychological

and physical—that he felt as if he came from a very soft and self-indulgent western world.

‘That’s wrong!’ Alexei was shouting at him now. ‘If you open like that, Rupert, there are sure ways of defeating you.’

Alexei knew most of the classic chess openings, and their defensive and offensive possibilities. Rupert was therefore beaten in spirit before he could make more than three or four clumsy moves.

‘Okay. You win,’ he said wearily.

‘Another! Only this time start with your pawn this way, then your knight. That’s a good opening. Very famous.’

‘You know the answer to that too, no doubt.’

‘No, I don’t. Nobody does yet.’

‘Okay,’ Rupert said, determined to make his mind stick it out. ‘I’ll move my pawn and then my knight as you say.’

But Rupert knew that he would be beaten again, and he soothed himself with an unwilling thought: he knew that he alone had the secret of Nina Vodopyanov’s heart locked in his own—which was more than Alexei and his life-force had. There were no classical openings and offensives to that, only the intangibility of a mysterious nerve which had nothing to do with intellectual games, or passions, or even a physical attraction. If it could be called love, then he was in love with Nina Vodopyanov and she with him. But he could not call it love, because he could not love two women. That was impossible. There was never any doubt in his mind that he loved Jo. *‘That’s all there is to it,’* he repeated to himself, and whatever he felt for Nina was something quite different.

‘You are thinking,’ Alexei reprimanded. ‘You are not playing chess.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Rupert said. ‘I’m not much good at this game.’

‘But it is simple!’ he said. ‘There are exact rules. You are like Nina. She says why play games so seriously? Well, I tell her, it develops concentration, planning. You are a navigator, Rupert; it’s not right that you don’t play chess. Nina doesn’t like wasting her time.’ He gathered up the chess-men to abandon the game. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘she is very worried about you.’

‘I must have given her a great deal of trouble.’

‘No! I am the only trouble she’s got. I think she is too tired

now, too tired of me. I have worn her out.' Alexei looked thoughtful and worried. 'Last night she was sick. She was once very ill, did you know?'

Rupert nodded, wanting not to hear this at all but determined to listen and to understand it and suffer it.

'She is not strong, although she thinks she is. When Nina is unhappy she becomes very thin and very nervous. Once, when it became too bad, she thought she would kill herself, so I said to her: "*That's not so good for a communist to think of killing yourself. That's a very bad communist.*"'

Rupert could not look at Alexei, because he dare not look close enough to discover if Alexei were warning him and telling him what he knew. Alexei must be worried about Nina and he was simply rambling on—that's all it was. He looked at Alexei and knew he was right: Alexei knew nothing, except that suddenly Nina had moments of some new misery, and perhaps this kind of unhappiness brought back memories of the other kind which Nina had suffered when her children had died, when she had wanted to throw herself in front of a train.

'She'll be all right when I go away,' he told Alexei. 'Then you won't have to worry. I've been a very big responsibility for her.'

'That's true,' Alexei said, and nodded more agreement, more worry.

*

Rolland was calm when he saw his father ill. For a moment he looked like a Russian boy. It was the way he wore his shirt or his trousers or his hair, or his red kerchief. He was heavy with books and models and photographs and badges. Two friends had come with him, and Rupert was entertaining from his bed a lovely girl of twelve with straw hair who had a firm hold on Rolland's life already, and a small boy his own age who obviously, by the look of him, dreamed exciting dreams. He rarely spoke to anyone, but Rolland seemed to be very attached to him. They spoke Russian together, and Rupert listened with amazement to Rolland's fluent though childish grasp of the language.

'He's a wonderful boy,' Nina said lovingly and proudly. 'Listen to his Russian.'

'How did you pick it up so quickly?' Rupert asked him.

'I don't know,' Rolland said. 'Almost everybody at the *artek*

spoke English. Everybody learns English here, did you know that?’

That calm, rather emotionless voice of his son reassured Rupert. He felt as if he had just emerged from a dark hole. He had been locked up all this time in a world that had absolutely no links at all with his own. No wonder that he had been exaggerating sentiment and emotion and fear.

‘That’s good,’ he said happily to Rolland. ‘Well. Now we can go home.’

‘Is your pneumonia better?’ Rolland asked him.

Rupert saw Nina’s slight nod and he said, ‘Yes. It’s almost gone now.’

They had already packed his bags for him and Nina had supervised his tickets, his transport, and the sad Russian good-byes. Nina herself was coming to Moscow with him. A hundred people came to shake his hand and to give him gifts and badges, flowers and a large water-melon. But it was Tatyana who made it difficult.

Tatyana wore her heart on her sleeve, and all the energy and busyness and occupation she had lately choked her life with were about to stop. Would someone else enjoy the same sort of absorption and trouble that she had devoted to him? He did not think it likely; and though he would never know how much of it was affection for himself or affection for Nina, or Tatyana’s devotion to work itself, he knew that he had watched a wonderful model of his own making at work. He had believed for years in the true value of work, in its reality and even in its curious sort of honour. Tanya believed in no such nonsense, because she didn’t have to believe in something which came from her nature and upbringing.

What Tatyana had taught him was that no matter how much he respected work, he was ultimately a dilettante of it; and he had learned this by simply watching her and feeling her functional loyalty to what she did. He would never again stand off and make wide theories about something he had never really known, or depended on, or even thoroughly understood.

He wondered if he properly understood it yet.

So Tatyana wept. She wiped her eyes in her kerchief and kissed Nina affectionately; they hugged each other; and when Rupert

broke into his armoury and bent over and kissed her lightly on the cheek, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him firmly and said: 'Nu . . . Rupert. You have been very nice. You are just like that little English boy, Lord Fauntleroy.'

Rupert wondered if he had heard right. He knew he had. He was so amazed that he forgot his farewells and said:

'What do you know about little Lord Fauntleroy?'

'Oh, I have read the book a long time ago. I wept . . .'

'Tanya!' he said affectionately. 'Never tell anyone what you just told me! Please . . .' And he hugged Tatyana so that now she was surprised, and only the business of further goodbyes stopped him laughing with more delight and pleasure than seemed safe, considering all his other troubles.

This time, too, he would also be saying goodbye to Alexei for the last time. Whatever happened, there was little chance that he would ever see the Russian again. Obviously Alexei had planned to get on the train and come to Moscow with them, obviously Nina had begged him not to, had warned him off by telling him not to be irresponsible, to think of his friend and guest who was tired and seriously ill and unable to stand the sort of excitement with which Alexei attended everything.

But Alexei came in the limousine to the railway station at Simferopol, trying to carry Rupert's bags, treating Rupert as if he were the totterer, while Alexei himself had plenty of limbs to spare. He held Rupert's arm for an hour in the car, and from time to time hit his knee and said: 'Ah, Rupert! You'll be happy to see your wife, to be at home in your beautiful little country. Are there roses in England?' he said to Rolland who was sitting in the front seat with his two friends. 'There are! Look at our wild summer roses.' They had flitted past miles back. 'Ah well,' he said. 'We are sad to lose such a good friend.'

Rupert realized that when he did leave Soviet Russia, it would be under the shadow of this same vast word, this cry at his heart for his loyal friendship. But it no longer bothered him. It was no longer such a frightening appeal to a frightened man who was determined to guard his sacred friendship with all the keys of his conscience, which were in turn locked away with a thousand other keys in a safe, inviolable untouched place. Now he could breathe safely with Alexei, and he could suffer the word and

accept the meaning without feeling frightened, or aware that they were setting a monster of responsibility onto him.

The only monster on him now was one of his own making, and though Teddy hadn't turned up, he wondered just how safe he really was: how much of this fear was the imagination of guilt, and how much of it was the terror of a badly broken morale.

He waited to one side at the station while Nina and Alexei made some sort of a farewell. They had obviously said their good-byes elsewhere, and all that was left was a formal parting, a quick embrace which did not mean anything. Nina begged him to be careful, and he nodded and promised not to overdo it.

'Alexei,' she said. 'You must not go mad. For my sake . . .'

'Don't worry about me. I'll wait for you to come back.'

He staggered a few steps towards Rupert and snatched him up and in an embrace and, to prove the point, lifted him off the ground.

Rupert was not very pleased to see tears in Alexei's lively eyes.

'You're a good man and a good friend, Rupert,' he bellowed. 'I shall never forget what you did for me. I shall never forget you. But you'll be all right. Don't worry. Don't let them crush you, eh?'

He hugged Rupert again to give him strength. The tears were obviously regret—regret at parting, regret for Rupert's sickness, regret for the end of something. But it was impossible to look at Alexei and read regret very deeply into his face. There was none of it: nothing would ever crush Alexei with lost hopes, and Rupert felt his old sense of superiority to Alexei's naïve view of life disappearing. Like Alexei, he wanted to say:

'You're a good man too, Alexei. I'll never forget you.'

But his English character stayed up, and he didn't say anything at all. He did notice that Alexei followed Nina with his eyes, and for a moment he looked alone and unhappy and puzzled, but then it passed and he shouted out to them:

'Get some chickens at Zhabarozh. They are best there.'

Chapter Thirty-six

Two days in the train in a hot compartment with Nina and Rolland had its own agonies, and he was worse when he reached Moscow. He was a man of sawdust, and though he longed to reach home, to escape, and to disappear and remove for ever the whole experience from his mind, he had no means of doing so. He begged Nina to try to get him on the next day's train or plane, but she was the dutous Nina, and she refused. Moreover she had kept his passport to get their exit visas.

'You're worse,' she told him determinedly. 'You don't look well.'

'All the more reason to go quickly,' he said weakly.

'I can't let you go home to England like that. And I can't even come with you to look after you. Two more days in the train to London with Rolland, and who knows what would happen to you?'

'Get me on a plane.'

She had read him the news again, and two more people had been arrested: an American tourist with his bags full of religious propaganda in Russian, and another German who had been touring the Ukraine in his car. The German had been arrested with cameras and diaries and notes on military installations near Odessa. 'Not one of Coleman's boys, anyway,' Rupert said to himself. The camera precluded it, although Germans and cameras were so natural together that even Coleman would probably find it difficult to break the habit. More arrests were expected, she said.

'You promised Jo you wouldn't fly,' Nina said to him now.

'Isn't this something of an emergency?' he appealed.

She shook her head. He was now lying in bed in the Peking Hotel, and outside the window the city of Moscow was warm and wet, and the cars seemed to be licking the damp roads like a giant tiger licking up milk.

‘It’s bad for Rolland to wait here,’ he tried.

‘I spoke to Feodor Nikolaievitch on the phone, and he says if you can’t travel we might find someone to take Rolland home for you.’

‘Ah no!’ he cried. He felt the blood draining from his cold flesh. If Teddy tried to send Rolland home alone, it was easy to imagine that he had other reasons for doing so. *You can let the boy go because you’ve got your man.*

‘Don’t, for heaven’s sake, try to send Rolland home without me. Jo would be demented. She couldn’t stand another jolt like that. Don’t even think of it.’

‘That’s true,’ she said. ‘You must talk to Feodor about it. He’ll be here tomorrow.’

She was sitting on his bed. He was in one of two rooms of an old-fashioned suite. They were all old-fashioned, but it was better than the Metropole. It was clean, large, weightily functional. Rolland was in the second vast room painting his own portrait. They had taught him how to use oils at the *artek*, and Nina had bought him oils and canvas boards.

Nina had already spent two days telephoning and going to her Ministry and bringing doctors who had given him a small sterile bottle. Nina told him that he must spit into it, all his spit, so that it could be tested.

‘Spare me that,’ he said and pushed it away.

‘Don’t be stubborn. We must know! It’s absolutely necessary.’

‘It’s revolting,’ he said.

‘Never mind that,’ she said. ‘Please don’t make a fuss.’

They were building up more intimacies, and it was becoming more and more dangerous. He gave in to her. But that little bottle was repulsive; it made him feel very sick. It became another pathway to moral disintegration—spitting into a small bottle. But he had no resistance left. He knew that if he tried to stand up now he would probably fall down again.

‘Is Teddy in Moscow?’ he asked tiredly. ‘Is he waiting for something?’

‘He’s with his family. He’ll be here tomorrow.’

He lay back and thought of Teddy and looked at this Russian face in this Russian room in this Russian city, and he decided: ‘I might as well tell her. If I can explain exactly how I got into

this, and what I've done and what I haven't done, she may understand it.'

'What do all these new doctors think?' he asked her.

'They say what Dr. Dolidze said in Yalta. But they also say that it depends on these new tests and more X-rays. You go to the tuberculosis clinic this afternoon.'

He winced. 'What do you think?' he asked her.

'Ah, Rupert. I *can't* think any more. I am sick with worry about you.'

For a moment it looked as if she were going to abandon discipline and give herself a moment's beautiful relief. He could see it coming. She was going to lean over him and lose herself hopelessly and lovingly for a moment over his face and his eyes, and weep with the pain of what they were holding back.

'Nina!' Rolland called from the other room. 'There is no black in this paint-box. How do you make black?'

'I don't know, sweetheart. I don't know. I'll have to get you some,' she said quickly in reply.

He waited expectantly, but she hesitated. 'She's being careful. She's afraid of this damned infection,' he decided. The thought was unworthy, but he suddenly felt that he *did* have the disease. They were probably right. There was something digging into his nerves, into his mind, into the very marrow of his heart. Something was terribly wrong.

'I suppose it's all my own fault,' he said wearily to her, wondering how he could tell her wh.^{at} he wanted to, without hurting her. 'Tell me one thing, Nina,' he began tentatively.

'Yes?'

'Why were you so suspicious of me when I first came to Russia?'

'Don't say such a thing.'

'Yet it's true!' he insisted.

'Don't say such a thing,' she repeated indignantly. But she changed her mind and said: 'I wasn't suspicious. I simply wanted you to be the man I thought you were, and the one Alexei had told me about. That's all it was. I was afraid that you might not be . . .' She hesitated again.

'What?' he asked laconically.

'I didn't know anything about you,' she said unhappily. 'And

anyway, I can't help believing in people. What else is there to believe in? If you believe that your own life *always* depends on the unselfish behaviour of thousands of other people, somewhere, then you have to believe in their heroism also. I have to, Rupert. I will never change.'

'That doesn't explain your suspicions of me,' he said.

'It explains *you*,' she told him. 'You were a rich man, even a capitalist perhaps. I didn't want to find that you were a selfish man as well. How could I admire you then?'

He laughed. 'Is that all?'

'Oh, I know what you mean,' she said. 'But I tell you I can't help thinking the way I do. It's very complicated. I admired you so much after all that Alexei told me. What a wonderful thing you did, Rupert. But I also wondered if people like you, who know nothing about us, could come here as a true friend. How *can* you be friends if you don't understand us? So how could I help thinking in that way also? One always thinks that if you don't understand us, then you might very well be doing something terrible against us.'

'Even a Hero of the Soviet Union?'

She blushed and did not reply.

'It doesn't really matter,' he told her. 'And anyway, you were probably right.'

'Don't say that now. I was wrong, Rupert. It isn't enough any more to be just a Russian woman or even a Soviet woman.' She thought for a moment and said suddenly, 'What a terribly complicated responsibility it is to be a human being.'

'Wasn't it always so?'

'But I didn't realize it before. You taught me that. You taught me, Rupert, that it is not simple. The individual is so terribly complicated. I would never have thought before that I would feel as I do for anyone from your world, or that I would always be glad, all my life, simply because you are alive somewhere. I'll be glad . . .'

Her eyes had filled with tears, although she did not look unhappy. But he knew it was hopeless now. He could never tell her.

She laughed with sudden Russian gaiety and slipped her hand tightly into his. 'Do you know what surprises me most, and is still the most difficult thing to understand?'

He said *No*.

She held him tight. 'That you and I are so much alike in our hearts, even though you are not a communist and I am. I am more like you, Rupert, than anybody else on earth. We seem to have the secret of the whole world locked somewhere inside us. I have to ask myself why. What is it? What does it mean?'

'You'll have to tell me that. What *does* it mean?'

'I don't know, except that you must dream for the world what I dream for it. It must be so. I can feel that much, even though I know you disagree with me now. I feel it without reason or evidence or logic.'

'It's true,' he said. 'I certainly don't agree with you. But why must there be reason or evidence or even logic, so long as you *do* feel?'

'Feeling can be wrong,' she interrupted. 'It's not enough.'

'It can also be right.'

'Oh, I hope so!' she said, unfolding her fingers gently from his because Rolland was calling her again. 'I would never recover if I thought that this feeling was wrong; or that we were, in fact, deadly enemies.'

*

The hospital for diseases of the chest was a very old red-brick building, and the Ministry limousine drove into its muddy courtyard under anaemic trees, and Rupert felt that this hospital, like all old hospitals, was soaked in disease, sickness and death.

They were ready for him. The waiting-rooms were furnished with horse-hair sofas, and one was empty. 'Take your trousers off and your shoes,' a young woman doctor told him briskly in English. She was young, efficient, untouched by legends. He pulled off his trousers and felt ridiculous in his clean shirt and underpants and socks. He looked at Nina, but he could see no humour in Nina's eyes.

'Love is blind,' he decided.

'Put your coat on, so that you don't catch cold,' Nina told him.

The doctor said *No* and took him to the X-ray room, which was hot and modern. They photographed his chest from all sides, and then put him into a frame and a moving plate shot up on rods and took angle pictures of his lungs. They finally took his temperature as he stood up in his socks, and the doctor

brought him his trousers and shoes and he put them on and followed her like a dog down the wide dark corridors, already defeated by their monumental sadness.

'It's a bit grim,' he whispered to Nina when she came into the office of the Professor where he was now waiting.

'It's very old. But the Professor is famous. He is our best.'

The office was old Russian, it was also leather and horse-hair, and the Professor looked like a sprite. A quick look at Rupert and at Nina and he had seen it all. 'You were a famous sportsman?' he said to Rupert in Russian.

Sportsman in Russian was *sportsman* in English.

'Not at all,' Rupert told him.

'He means that you were always healthy and fit,' Nina said.

'More or less, yes.'

The Professor looked at X-ray plates which the young woman doctor held up to the panel of light for him. He looked at files, samples, reports.

'Very difficult,' he said to Rupert. 'We must be sure.'

'What does it look like now?' Rupert asked him.

'Too early to say. We are doing this too quickly. There are surer ways, but they take time. How do you feel?'

'The way I look,' he said to Nina, too tired to bother with Russian now.

'It's very difficult,' the Professor repeated, looking at the plates again, still being held patiently by his assistant. 'A famous sportsman,' he said to himself.

Rupert waited.

'You may go,' the Professor told him. 'Do you speak French?'

'Yes.'

'First, you must go on spitting into the bottle,' the Professor told him in French. 'Then you must come back tomorrow or the next day.'

'Two more days?' Rupert said. 'Isn't there any quicker way?'

The Professor shook his head. 'We are already being too quick.'

Rupert stood up. 'Couldn't I travel anyway? Couldn't I go? You could send me the results to England.'

The Professor said he wouldn't advise it. 'You understand,'

he said to Rupert, 'it may be very important that you rest just now. Travel may be extremely dangerous.'

'All right,' Rupert said, and Nina helped him on with his coat. As they left the hospital Rupert asked Nina again about Teddy.

'Tomorrow,' she said, clearly puzzled now by this preoccupation with Feodor Nikolaievitch. 'He's sure to come tomorrow, Rupert, so don't worry about him so much.'

Chapter Thirty-seven

Teddy looked menacing, reluctant, mysterious. In his city clothes (his white raincoat and a soft hat) he looked a different man. He was bony, dry, quiet and rather aggressive.

‘Why did you get ill?’ he said to Rupert who was lying in bed.

‘Don’t ask me questions like that,’ Rupert answered. ‘Ask me why the sun rises and sets, it’s the same thing.’

Teddy shrugged and looked at Nina who was restless and trying not to show her agitation, thereby showing it and revealing all. Teddy’s eyes roamed from Nina to Rupert, and there was no doubt that he had guessed everything.

‘Why don’t you sit down?’ Teddy said to her.

‘I don’t know,’ she told him. ‘Do you need me here?’

‘Yes, because sometimes I don’t understand Rupert’s English, and he doesn’t understand my Russian, and I want to talk to him.’

They had developed this two-sided means of talking in the Crimea. Rupert spoke Russian or English, and Teddy understood the English and spoke Russian. It worked well enough, except when a particularly subtle shape was necessary, or a particularly important phrase.

‘Then I’ll stay, Feodor Nikolai’tch,’ Nina said.

Rupert recognized their usual antagonism in the way they spoke to each other, as if they had just been arguing about the heart and soul of their communist ideology in its crisis. Was Nina a Stalinist and Teddy an anti-Stalinist? Were phrases like this any good when you looked at the people themselves and tried to read such crude doctrines into their complex minds and hearts?

‘Sit down, Nina,’ Rupert said quietly to her and pointed to the bed near him. Let Teddy guess the worst. Let him know the truth. It didn’t matter any more.

‘Why do you want to go home so quickly?’ Teddy began

lazily, as if he had finished with the easy preliminaries and would now begin to get around to some real issue which had to be faced. 'Why do you want to leave us, Rupert?'

'Because I finished what I came here to do,' Rupert said with a little shrug.

'You didn't see half the Greek sites,' Teddy pointed out. 'You didn't even visit Phanagoria. Surely you wanted to see that famous place?'

'Let's say I found what I wanted to on the island of Leuce,' Rupert said boldly, determined not to play the game of cat and mouse, particularly with the mouse as his role. He was going to be honest. He would admit nothing. But he knew that he dare not go into a corner where he could not be truthful with himself, because then he would only get tangled up in his own deceptions.

'Why? What did you find?' Teddy asked.

'A small piece of evidence that the Greeks had been there.'

'Is that all you were looking for?' Teddy said, and he suddenly sounded rather sarcastic.

'Perhaps not,' Rupert admitted, relieved that this was emerging at last, however cautiously and dangerously. 'Why? What else do you think I was looking for?'

Teddy smiled lazily. The expert on relaxation obviously didn't believe in theories of strict posture. He was slumped down in an armchair, his long legs sticking out.

'You know, Rupert,' he said, 'you were probably wasting your time.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes. Couldn't our experts have told you all you wanted to know without all this travel and trouble?'

'That's not as good as looking for it yourself, and finding what you're looking for,' he said. 'Ask Nina. Wasn't it worth while when you found that coin, Nina?'

But Nina was clearly out of it. She simply nodded. She looked a little puzzled, as if she were anxious to go away from them. Was that her embarrassment, or was it a premonition that something was happening, something quite subtly savage and perhaps tragic as well? Teddy took no notice of her. He was relaxed, poised, watchful.

'Even so,' he said to Rupert. 'I often wanted to say to you—

what's the use of coming all this way to a controversial country like ours, just to dig up the fragments of a dead civilization? Eh?"

Rupert shrugged now. 'Why not? We're not all interested in controversy and politics, Teddy.'

'Aren't you?'

'I certainly wasn't when I came here,' he said. 'Not the way you people are.'

Teddy laughed. 'Everybody in the west thinks that we are only interested in politics . . .'

'Well, so you are,' Rupert interrupted sharply.

'So we have to be,' Teddy said lightly, unbothered by rude interruptions. 'Isn't the future of the world being decided by politics?'

'That's the trouble!'

'Don't you think we should know what we're doing, therefore?'

'In theory, yes,' Rupert said. 'But there should always be two sides to politics. Even yours.'

'Why only two? Why not a dozen, a hundred?'

'There are, in fact, only two sides to your kind of politics,' Rupert told him. 'Capitalism and communism.'

Teddy stood up and took off his raincoat. 'Well, he's settling down to it,' Rupert decided. 'It's obviously going to be a long siege.'

But Teddy was smiling to himself, and he said rather provocatively: 'What do you know about communism and capitalism, with your brain steaming in the clouds of ancient Greece?'

'Not much,' Rupert admitted. 'But I suppose I know a little more than I did before I came here.'

'For instance?' Teddy said, putting his coat on his chair and sitting down again and putting his hands behind his head.

'It's no good asking me that now,' Rupert said, 'because I don't really know yet.'

'Oh, you needn't be afraid, Rupert,' Teddy said. 'You can talk.'

Rupert glanced sharply at him. Was this the sort of test he was being submitted to? Was Teddy tasting his mind like an inquisitor to see where it would go before he made up his own mind what to do with his victim? 'I may be fighting for my life,' Rupert decided rather dramatically, 'but I'm not going to crawl or be

dishonest. I've got to tell the truth, no matter what it costs. That's about all that's left to me.

'Why do you say that?' he asked Teddy. 'What is there to be afraid of?'

'I don't know,' Teddy said. 'But most people like you, who come here from western countries, act as if they're afraid of contamination, or afraid of our ideas, or afraid of our desire for friendship. Weren't you also afraid?'

'I suppose I was,' he replied, looking at Nina. Hadn't she also felt the same thing? He was suddenly aware that he had been very suspicious of them also. So he was! Suspicion was therefore a two-edged world after all. 'Anyway,' he said defensively, 'it's not so much fear as rather stupid suspicion.'

'What's the difference?' Teddy asked. 'Doesn't one lead to the other?'

'Perhaps, but . . .'

'Do you think that you have to be afraid of us, Rupert?'

Rupert felt the enormity of that question hitting him in his sick, weak stomach. Too easy to say *No*, and save his neck. Too easy to say *Yes* for bravado's sake and tell only half the truth.

'No,' he said. 'I don't think we have to be afraid of you: of Russia, that is. But I think we have to be afraid of communism, which is almost the same thing.'

'Why do you say that?' Teddy demanded. 'Communism isn't uniquely Russian.'

'No. But foreign communists take orders from you.'

'How do you know that? How can you possibly say that so positively, Rupert?' It was Nina. It surprised him, and he realized now that he was fighting for his two lives—the real one which Teddy was after, and the inner one which attached him like a twin to Nina, even through the steel walls and iron gates of differences, divisions, prejudices and background.

'I don't know,' he admitted. 'But why do foreign communists always do and think what you Russians think?'

'Because we are all communists,' Nina said heatedly.

'That would be okay,' he argued sharply and just as heatedly, 'if it wasn't so crass. You say Stalin is a god, so they agree. You say Stalin is no longer a god, so they also agree. They follow you like dogs . . .'

'No, they don't,' she cried.

'Yes, they do,' Teddy said calmly.

'Feodor!' Nina said angrily.

Teddy ignored her. 'Not like dogs perhaps, but more like soldiers,' he said, 'because we have all been in a long war, Rupert. Of course they've been blindly obedient to whatever we've done. This country is the first communist country, and every capitalist in the world would like to see us broken and beaten. And whatever else has been important to communists in the world, it has been even more important that the first communist country survives. Above all else,' he repeated, 'it was important that we survive.'

'So they do what you tell them to do,' Rupert said stubbornly.

'We don't have to tell them to do anything. They know without our telling them,' Teddy said in his rather cryptic, dry Russian, which made Rupert realize that he had learned a great deal of the language in these past few weeks. He was surprised that he could defend himself in it so well, and though his heart was beating faster, and he felt flushed and angry and trapped (not by one but by the two of them), he was as alert and as sharp as they were, in their language as well as in his own.

'Anyway,' Teddy was saying, 'that's all over now. We can look after ourselves. We are strong enough to defend ourselves against everybody, and communists elsewhere can now get on with their own affairs without having to watch over us so closely.'

Rupert shrugged again. This didn't really interest him. What did he care about the communist parties of the world? But he had put Teddy on the defensive, so he must now wait for him to pick up the threads of his sly inquisition.

'Nobody expects you to be a communist,' Teddy said to him then. 'All we have ever wanted of you, or any Englishman for that matter, is for you not to plan to make war on us.'

Teddy spoke down into his chest, throwing it off very casually. But Rupert looked at Nina and wished that she would get up and go now. He did not want her to hear this, because they were slowly coming to the real point.

'Why do you imagine that Englishmen want to make war on you?' he asked Teddy, firmer than ever in his belief that he must be bold as well as truthful.

'Too much evidence for us to think otherwise,' Teddy replied. 'You mean spies?'

Teddy sighed. 'Everybody has spies, Rupert. We have them too. Spying isn't the crime, as much as the plotting and planning that go on above and beyond it.'

'I don't know anything about that,' Rupert said.

Teddy looked at him carefully. 'What if you did? What if you had the decision to do these things, would you plan a war on us?'

Rupert was tempted again to lie. But something told him not to. Some stubborn nerve which would not allow his own dignity to give in so easily.

'Yes,' he said. 'I probably would plan a war on you.'

Nina looked horrified, assaulted, betrayed. She looked at him incredibly and said, 'But why, Rupert? How can you say such a thing?'

'Listen,' he said to her sharply. 'I'm sure your politicians and generals are planning a war on us, not because they want to invade us but because this is the nature of the world today. We have to plan a war on you, and you have to plan a war on us. How can we help it?'

'But that's cynical.'

'Nevertheless it's true. It exists. The situation exists.'

'All right, all right,' Teddy interrupted to calm them down. 'But tell me, Rupert: how would you get us out of that situation? Or do you think it ought to go on?'

'What fool wants it to go on?' Rupert snapped back impatiently. 'I don't! Do you think I want my wife and children burned to the bone by atomic blast? Am I that much of a monster?'

'So?' Teddy said suspiciously.

'I don't know how we get out of it,' Rupert said. 'I honestly don't know. I am too ignorant to know. I simply haven't paid that much attention to these things.'

'That's because you hate politics,' Nina put in coldly. 'You let others think for you. And they tell you to hate politics, so that *they* can do what they like.'

'All right. I admit I'm wrong in that sense,' he replied. 'But politics in our country are not like politics in your country, Nina. Here you wrap your life, your culture and your whole education

in them. You are singular and cold-blooded about it. You enforce it! But in England politics are something to be avoided like the plague by any sane man, because it is ninety per cent hypocrisy, and ten per cent God knows what . . .'

'Even so,' she said. 'You let them rule you.'

'All right. I'm wrong,' he said again. He did not want to fight her. He hated fighting her.

Teddy seemed bored and uninterested in this diversion, and Rupert looked at him expectantly again and then began to move his body vigorously and impatiently back and forth as if to urge Teddy to get on with it, to bring out all his challenge now, and he would take his chances on the result.

'Some men do strange things,' Teddy said, as if this were simply a friendly conversation and nothing more. 'Very strange . . .'

'We're all human,' Rupert interrupted aggressively.

'That is no complete recommendation,' Nina reminded him again.

Teddy's look was like a dagger: '*Be quiet! Shut up!*' it said. Nina was subdued by it and Teddy raised his eyebrows and dropped them again.

'You see,' he said to Rupert, 'some men make the mistake of getting into a serious situation without thinking, without contemplating what they are really doing and what is really behind it. That seems to be the danger now, don't you agree, Rupert?'

To lie? Or tell the truth? 'That's true,' Rupert said.

'A war could start because even honest men don't think enough about what they are doing . . .'

'Perhaps that's the real tragedy,' Rupert said.

'Even an honest man like you could do a terrible thing,' Teddy went on, 'simply because he felt it to be his unthinking duty.'

Rupert did not like that. 'What are you suggesting?' he snarled quickly. 'That we begin to investigate duty?'

'Why not?' Teddy said. 'If it's a good duty, it can stand the inspection. If it's a bad duty, and you are an honest man, it will collapse of its own weight. Not so?' he added.

Was Teddy appealing to him now? Was Teddy trying to save him from his own folly and even give him a way out? Or was this

a last trap, a trick to test that final ounce in the balance and that last guardian of life and death—where does any man's duty lie?

Rupert knew that he must be very honest with himself. He knew he had thought of this a great deal, though not directly. His conscience had bitten him too deep to avoid the question of how far he had been right and how far he had been terribly wrong, not simply in the acts of casual (and what seemed to him, flimsily unimportant) espionage for J. B. Lille, which was the thing at issue here, but in the role of himself, in the structure of his human dignity, and in his function as a man.

'Let me put it this way,' he said slowly to Teddy. 'Every man ought now to use his own intelligence, not only to decide what his duty is, but also to find the answer to this nightmare we're living in before it all goes up in a bubble of blood and cosmic dust.'

Teddy looked thoughtful again, as if debating it. 'What do you mean—*intelligence*?' he asked suspiciously. 'Intelligence is a complicated word,' he said, and he used *intelligence* in English so that it suddenly became a sinister word. 'Intelligence changes its character all the time. The very meaning of the word is dynamic. It means *to know*. And how much *do* you know, Rupert? How much *do* you know about our country, for instance?'

'Very little,' Rupert admitted, brushing aside its double meaning.

'Then how can you use your intelligence if it isn't really intelligence at all? You admit you don't *know* . . .'

'I can change all that. I can easily find out what I don't know now. I can do that,' Rupert said, knowing that it was coming to a head. Teddy was making up his mind, and though it was still in the balance, and though Rupert still expected the door of his room to open and a burly Russian to plunge in with the papers or the accusations, or however they did it here, he had to make his real point before it was too late. 'You see, Teddy,' he said, 'there is a certain amount of stupidity and self-deception in all of us. Even in you and even in Nina.' How could that be so, he wondered, when Nina (now silent and perhaps aware of some other battle being fought out for his existence) was poised like a child, caught in a drama which might also decide her future, but which she was powerless to influence. 'A person can't do what I've done and seen and felt in your country and come out

of it exactly the same man. I must be different. Of course I'm different! Of course my intelligence has also changed. How, exactly, I don't know yet . . .'

'Ahhh!' Teddy said a little cynically.

'But I don't want your country blown up,' Rupert went on determinedly, 'and for that matter I don't suppose I'll ever do anything that will either encourage that kind of situation or contribute to it in any way. I don't like communism. But at least —knowing what sort of people you have produced with it—I'm not afraid of it any more. And if you say that fear is suspicion and suspicion is fear, then I can probably get over my suspicions of you, although not quite. But that isn't really the point of what I am saying.' He looked at Nina. 'You know, Nina,' he said, 'you don't really know anything about me, and not much about any of us. We know less about you. I know that very well. We are very much more ignorant than you are . . .'

Nina began to say something but he interrupted. 'Let me finish.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Please do!' She too obviously wanted it over and done with.

'You can't blame this sort of ignorance on anybody except oneself. I blame myself and I blame you. I suppose, in my own case, I have allowed my intelligence to be guided in the easiest and least painful ways by experts and newspapers, and by all sorts of stupid and ready-made opinions which I didn't question very much. And if I do question them now it's only because I realize that I have to. If I don't, then I know very well that I'm a fool.'

'We're all fools part of the time,' Teddy said good-naturedly.

'Even so,' Rupert went on harshly, 'you'll never make me a communist. On the contrary! I came here as a man trying to escape the fetters of inherited wealth. But you'll send me home determined to take my money back again. What for, I don't know. I wasn't a capitalist before, but I may become one now.'

'Not you!' Teddy said.

'Why not? My old theories were stupid, my ideas half-baked. But now I want my money. I want my wife and children to enjoy life and benefit by what I can give them. I suppose that is what everybody should have, but at least I ought to start with my own

children first. As for myself, all I want is the time and the means now to see what this is all about. You *need* time. No wonder the world doesn't understand itself. Who's got the time and the patience to understand it? Well, I'm going to give myself the time and the patience, because I've got to get to the bottom of this somehow—capitalist or no. There's an answer somewhere.'

Teddy smiled a little and suddenly stood up. 'You won't be much use as a genuine capitalist, Rupert. Is there any promise for you, or for anybody, in exploitation? No, no! I can't see you as a fat capitalist.'

Rupert watched Teddy putting on his white coat, and Rupert felt like a tightly compressed spring waiting for release. But Teddy seemed to be waiting for something else. He had his coat on, and he looked thoughtfully at Nina. He appeared to debate with himself for a moment, and just as he was about to say something, there was a cracking knock at the door.

Rupert knew then that it was too late. Fate and the thousand-faced future were at the door; and he sat encased in ice and cold with fear as Nina unlatched the lock.

It was another future with another face. Rolland had come back.

'Rolland!' Nina said. 'Where have you been?'

He was wet and covered in mud. 'I was playing football in the gardens,' he said, out of breath, 'but a policeman told us we couldn't, so I ran.'

'You get those wet things off,' Nina told him bossily. 'Quickly! You're soaked through. And look at your shoes!'

Rolland did not glance at his father, Rolland did not see him die and then return to life again. The boy took Nina's bossing diplomatically, and perhaps even gladly. It had the edge of another kind of affection, not the kind that was ready-made and taken for granted—the sort of affection he got from his own parents. Rupert looked at Nina and suddenly felt the heart that bossed his son beating longingly in his own. The mother of no children. Here, at least, was the son and the childish copy of the man whom she loved.

'Rupert!' Teddy said.

Rupert came back to the world of Teddy—Teddy who was always ready.

‘Yes?’

‘How do you feel?’ Teddy asked him, watching him closely.

Rupert had forgotten that he was ill, he had forgotten that his head was hot and that his body shivered and that his will was weak. Resistance had arisen, life was defending itself . . .

‘All right,’ he said. ‘Quite well, in fact.’

‘Why don’t you get up?’ Teddy said.

Rupert looked at Teddy’s mysteriously simple face and he wondered what lay at the root of this man. ‘Yes, that’s right!’ he said to Teddy. ‘I think I will.’

‘Do *you* think you’ve got tuberculosis?’ Teddy asked him.

‘I should ask you that. You’re a doctor.’

Teddy put his hat on. ‘But I am asking you.’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Rupert said. ‘In fact I’m damned if I believe it.’

‘Good! I agree with you,’ Teddy said to him. ‘I don’t think you’ve got tuberculosis or anything of the sort. When a man like you falls ill, when his body breaks, you have to start looking here first.’ Teddy tapped his heart. ‘I don’t think there’s anything really wrong with you. Nothing that your own spirit can’t cope with . . .’

Rupert laughed in a wave of wonderful relief. ‘You’re right!’ he said to Teddy. ‘You’re absolutely right.’

‘I suppose all you needed was a bit of an argument about life. Don’t you agree?’ he said.

Was that what Teddy had been doing? Had Teddy simply been giving him a Russian argument about life in order to rescue his spirit and stir up his morale and unlatch the lock he had put on his own heart in terror of what was happening to it here? Did Teddy know so much? Could he possibly know so much?

‘Nina!’ Teddy called. ‘I’m going.’

‘Just a moment,’ she said, and while she went on telling Rolland to get his other shirt on and to wear his slippers, she came back into the room. Teddy put his arm through hers.

‘Let him go tomorrow on the train, Nina,’ he told her.

‘But the doctors . . .’ she began.

‘Never mind the doctors. I’ll settle with the doctors. Let him go home. That’s the best cure for him. That’s all he needs. If we keep him here any longer, perhaps he may never be able to leave.’

Nina nodded as if she understood. 'Yes,' Rupert could see her thinking. '*He could become seriously ill and die.*' But was that what was in Teddy's mind? Rupert realized that he would never know. He would never really know how much of his fear was in his own imagination, how much of it was real, how much of it was the price he was paying for the changes that were battering his mind and wrecking it, for the first time in his life, with problems which he could not solve, and could not throw off with Anglo-Saxon detachment.

'I'll come and see you off,' Teddy said to him.

'Okay,' Rupert told him as he stood at the door. 'Anyway, Teddy, you've bucked me up tremendously. I can't thank you enough.'

'Oh!' Teddy said and stopped as he had his hand on the knob of the door. He withdrew it and put it into his pocket. 'I forgot to give you this. They gave it to me when I was in Sevastopol.'

It was Rupert's blue guide book, dog-eared and worn as if many hands had been at it, but it was clearly his own.

'There's nothing very interesting in it anyway,' Teddy told Rupert. 'I don't know why you bothered so much about it.'

Rupert took the book, nodding agreement, unable to say anything at all as Teddy left.

But when he had closed the door, Rupert took a deep breath and said to Nina: 'Do you know, Nina; it's not going to be so easy, saying goodbye to my Russian friends tomorrow.'

She nodded. She understood the real meaning of it; and they glanced at each other for a moment, before some other part of the world could begin to crowd their lives with the insoluble riddle of how the heart must beat when its joys were so divided.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Nina's organization broke down, as if her nerve had broken down, and they arrived at the train late and in disorder. They could not find a porter, and Nina panicked and said, 'We will miss the train!' She picked up his heavy suitcase and tried to carry it.

He stopped her and said, 'Don't panic, Nina. We'll make it.'

The sad hours of the morning had been hectic for her—getting back his passport and collecting tickets and turning away the unknown friends who had discovered that he was in Moscow. There had been laundry to collect, Rolland's shoes to clean, his books to pack, and finally there had been the problem of getting a doctor from the tuberculosis clinic to come and see him and to confirm that he could travel. She was adamant about it. The young woman doctor had been sent by her professor, but they had waited and waited for her to come.

'Boje moi! I didn't think you'd ever get here,' Nina said to her.

The doctor was flushed and irritated because she had been shaken loose from her clinic and sent on this crazy errand. Her crisp manner implied that medicine must be calm, the patient must wait.

'It really is not right,' she said to Nina, 'hurrying like this.'

'How do you know what's right?' Nina cried savagely to her. 'There are times when you have to hurry.'

A little subdued, the doctor took off her raincoat and looked suspiciously at Rupert in his grey suit and then gave him a bundle of papers and a packet of large X-ray sheets.

'You must go immediately to a chest clinic in London with these when you arrive,' she told Rupert in English. 'The tests on the sputum were negative, and the blood tests show that you are very anaemic.'

'Does that mean that I haven't got tuberculosis?'

'On the evidence,' she said almost reluctantly, 'you haven't got it. There is little likelihood that you've ever had tuberculosis.'

Another world had lifted, and he looked at Nina whose eyes were diamond-bright, and her face was ecstatic with relief.

'Thank God for that,' she said.

'But you may have some sort of pneumo-sclerosis,' the young doctor warned him. 'So you must go to a clinic . . .'

'What's pneumo-sclerosis?' he asked, but before she could reply he said, 'It doesn't matter. I don't even want to know.'

If he didn't have tuberculosis the rest didn't matter. He knew that Teddy was right: there was absolutely nothing wrong with him that his own spirit could not cope with.

'Is that all?' Nina asked her.

'Yes. You can take these pills if you are weak.'

'Hurry,' Nina said, and Rupert snatched up the pills and shook hands with the doctor and called to Rolland who was taking photographs out of the window with a camera which Teddy had given him in some mysterious way the day before.

They left the doctor in his room putting on her efficient rain-coat, dismayed by this unseemly treatment of illness; and Nina held his arm in the car all the way, repeating: 'I'm very glad. I was worried. I can't tell you how worried I was.'

'And so was I,' he said. 'But Teddy was quite right.'

'Yes, oh yes!'

'Incidentally,' he had asked her. 'Why did Teddy go to Sevastopol?'

'I don't know,' she said, uninterested in Teddy now. 'I think it was to lecture to the Navy on diet and exercise. I don't really know.'

'What brought him back to Moscow then?'

'Heaven knows! Does it matter now! His father was ill, or our Ministry wanted him to do something urgently about diet for one of our expeditions. I'm not sure.'

He would never know.

They arrived at the station with so little time to spare that Nina, failing to find a porter, rushed to a policeman and said:

'Tovarish. Please help us with this luggage.' There were now six pieces of it, most of it heavy with books which he and Rolland had collected, and presents they had given him, and a Bokhara

rug and a samovar someone had sent him. The policeman looked at Nina as if she were mad and pointed out that he was not a porter. When she explained angrily that this was the English *gero*, Royce, and his train would leave without him in a few minutes, the policeman looked at the clock and said he would go and find a porter for her.

'He'll never find one!' she moaned.

'Why don't we carry it ourselves?' Rupert suggested.

'Don't. Please don't. I'll be back . . .'

She disappeared into the maw of the station and when she came back she had with her a phalanx of Ministry officials with broad trousers and broad hats and grey raincoats who had come to say an official goodbye to him. They shook hands solemnly with Rupert, moved bunches of flowers from their arms into his, and then picked up his suitcases and followed the hurrying, nervous Nina who held Rolland's hand tightly and said: 'Hurry, sweetheart!'

They raced along the platform to the carriage which was blue and new and luxurious. Nina pressed other passengers impatiently out of the doorway, and the phalanx of men and suitcases and parcels followed her. The compartment was already full of other gifts, it was packed with presents from God knows who: flowers, boxes, parcels, toys for Rolland and gifts marked for Jo and Tess.

The officials heaved his suitcases on to the rack over the passageway, and then disgorged themselves; and when Nina had counted the baggage and realized that now it was done and that it was all over, she was already pressing back her tears, holding back a world which would not let her go.

They went outside and onto the platform. They had a minute left. There was no sign of Teddy, and Rupert began to thank the officials of the Ministry, each one of whom raised his hat and shook hands. Then he saw Teddy loping gently along the platform in his long-legged sailor's gait, his perfection of relaxation rather than his perfection of bullet-like action.

'Okay?' he said to Rupert in English.

'Yes! Okay! We got here. Everything's all right,' he said to Teddy.

'Goodbye then,' Teddy said, and Rupert shook hands and looked into his face once more to solve the mystery, to see if he

could find one flicker of a secret. But again he would never know. He would never know.

It had to be Nina's turn now. She could not take her eyes off him. She was bleeding from terrible blows—if blood were the anguish and the wounds the heartache. She could not say anything, she could not even embrace him properly. Innocently she could have, guiltily it was forbidden.

He put something in her hand.

'Keep it,' he told her.

It was his golden star, and she looked shocked and horrified.

'But I can't take this. It's wrong . . .'

'I don't think I really deserved it,' he told her. 'I shouldn't have taken it in the first place. You keep it for me . . .'

'No, no!' she cried. She was weeping and clinging to his hand. 'Oh, no!' she cried. Then she saw Rolland and she bent over him suddenly and began to kiss him furiously and passionately, her tears smearing his surprised face, her suppressed sobs frightening him. 'Go, go!' she cried, her body a wreck, her heart at its farthest distance from her own safe world.

The whistle had blown, and Rupert leaned over and pulled Rolland away from her, and when she had straightened up he pushed some of her hair out of her face and smoothed it back, and then got into the train behind Rolland, as it jerked and began to move.

The officials waved, Nina hid her face in her hands, and along the far end of the platform a figure staggered like a wooden top.

'Rupairt!'

It was Alexei—the hero, the individual, the man, the friend, the undeniable husband, the unquenchable Russian . . .

'Alexei,' he cried.

'They said you were in trouble, so I came,' he cried as he ran tottering along after the train. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes, yes. Everything's fine,' Rupert shouted.

'Hokay. So good luck!' Alexei bellowed, finally coming to a stop. 'Come back, eh? Come back to us some time!'

'Some day,' Rupert shouted loudly, and all that he could see was the hunched hidden figure of Nina who would not look up, who held her face in her hands so that she could not see him go. The train gathered speed. They disappeared.

Would he ever come back? he was already asking himself. Could he? Dare he? He could only shake his head. How could he know what he would do? What sort of wreckage had he left there and what sort of hope had he given her? And what sort of a future was he taking home with him? It was more than he could answer now. He had so many answers to find out. He had so many answers to give also. What would he say to J. B. Lille, what would he say to Jo, to himself, to his old but hidden sense of duty? He didn't know.

'Look at all these parcels,' Rolland was saying.

He went back into the compartment. He saw Nina's tears still smeared over the soft brown cheek of his son, and he wondered how he was going to bear it. Not to see her, not to know that she was always there, in his presence and in his mind. He held the boy's head for a moment and allowed an Anglo-Saxon edge to disappear as he kissed his son, and tried to foresee what it all meant.

He didn't know yet.

But he would find out. He plunged his hand into his coat pockets and stared at the clattering scenery of wet Moscow suburbs. His right hand came upon two things that he had kept close and hidden to himself. One was the cheque they had given him, and the other was Coleman's trick fountain-pen.

He took out the cheque and looked at it for the first time. It was a sterling cheque on the Moscow Narodny Bank in London for £6,720. He was amazed and he thought: *unto him that hath . . .* He folded it up again and went into the passage and tore it up and threw it out of the open window. Then he smashed Coleman's fountain-pen on the top of the window, watched a pale colourless fluid flow down the clean glass, and he threw the remnants out after the money.

If he had to find out what the world was all about he might as well have a clean start. He told Rolland to go and wash his face, so that he did not have to endure the only shred of evidence left of another life, because there was only one life he could live, and he must now set about justifying it.

